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FRAMING ANTI-WAR THEATRE:
PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF *EMBEDDED*

by

Jeremy Gordon

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

Communication

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ABSTRACT

Framing Anti-war Theatre: Public Perceptions of *Embedded*

by

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Utah State University, 2008

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Extending research of framing anti-war protest is framed in the public sphere, this study examines theatre critics' reviews and viewers' responses to Tim Robbins' anti-war play *Embedded*. My research examines how two groups of publics interpreted *Embedded*: (1) professional theatre reviewers and (2) a sample of Utah State University students. It is important to note that the majority of the students who participated in this study are members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon), a consistently social and political conservative religious sect. Thus, how this specific group of viewers deciphered *Embedded* is of special interest. Critical analyses of both reviews and responses revealed the prominence of two seemingly irreconcilable partisan master frames in critics' and spectators' interpretations of the play's protest narratives. Although these frames seem to be incompatible, adherents to both "whining for peace" and "anti-war protest" consider protection of American democracy the primary goal. However, members of both groups define the role of anti-war protest in, and defense of, democracy differently. Examination of discourse suggests that marginalization of anti-war protest continues to be the privileged discourse. Overwhelming dismissal of *Embedded's* anti-war narratives by the majority of critics and Latter-day Saint (LDS) viewers indicates that dissent was framed according to cultural and societal values, which perpetuated conceptions of anti-war protest as deviant. Thus, in both public discussion and personal interpretation of *Embedded's* outward expression of protest, anti-war activism is perceived to be illegitimate when the United States is at war. Results suggest that most theatre

critics and LDS viewers relied on values framing in their perception of the play, which negated complex and nuanced discussion regarding military action in Iraq. By broadening discussion of how anti-war dissent is framed by including theatre critics and individual viewers, this research provides insight into how dissenting action is perceived within a larger cultural context. As findings reveal, it is reasonable to conclude that marginalization of anti-war dissent is not limited to mass media. Rather, I argue that dismissal of protest may be perpetuated on a wider societal scale, a problematic trend, especially as protest is widely considered to be a valuable tenet of democratic practice.

(139 pages)

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The modern dramatist is essentially a metaphysical rebel, not a practical revolutionary; whatever his personal convictions, his art is the expression of a spiritual condition. For he is a militant of the ideal, an anarchic individualist, concerned with the impossible rather than the possible; and his discontent extends to the very root of existence.

Robert Brustein (1964), *The Theatre of Revolt*

March 19, 2008 marked the 5 year anniversary of the United States' invasion of Iraq to overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime. Over 4,000 American soldiers have been killed in action, while various estimates of the number of Iraqi dead range from 80,000 to over one million (e.g., Goodman, 2008; McClatchy News Group, 2008). Another 1.4 million Iraqis have been displaced since the 2003 invasion (McClatchy News Group). In 2007, according to World Public Opinion, approximately 67 percent of citizens across the world believed that U.S.-led forces should leave Iraq within a year. According to the Pew Research Center, five years after the war began, 54 percent of Americans believe the U.S. made the wrong decision to invade Iraq. A *CBS News* poll shows that 82 percent of Americans say U.S. forces should be out of Iraq before the end of the next president's first term (LaPlante, 2008a). A recent book by Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph E. Stiglitz and co-author Linda J. Bilmes (2008) reports that the war in Iraq continues at a pace of \$12 billion a month.

Despite overwhelming public fatigue surrounding the Iraq War, some members of the Bush Administration still fail to acknowledge the majority of Americans' sentiments. For example, in a March 19, 2008 *CBS News* interview, Vice President Dick Cheney was told that two-thirds of Americans said the war in Iraq was not worth fighting. Cheney responded: "So?" When pressed for an explanation, Cheney explained, "I think you cannot be blown off course by the fluctuations in the public opinion polls" (cited in Myers, 2008, ¶ 29). In contrast, 81% of the American public believes that government leaders should take public opinion into account when making important decisions (World Public Opinion.org, 2008). Thus, the debate wages on in Washington, reasons for entering Iraq have been shifted, and questions regarding why U.S. forces are still there still linger. How much longer an American presence is needed and how much progress is being made in the reconstruction of the country continue to be contentious issues. President George W. Bush recently reiterated that the decision to invade Iraq was correct: "The decision to remove

Saddam Hussein was the right decision early in my presidency; it is the right decision at this point in my presidency; and it will forever be the right decision” (cited in Goodman, 2008a).

The overwhelming support among Utahns for Bush and his policy in Iraq was reflected in a consistent 50% approval rating for the president in 2006, one of only three states in the country (Wyoming and Idaho) with a rating that high (Egan, 2006). According to Matthew LaPlante (2007), a “healthy majority of Utah Republicans – 65% – still give Bush high ratings.” Even with a decrease of support for the Iraq War, 44% of Utah residents reported that George W. Bush has performed well as president (LaPlante). Robert Gehrke (2008) writes that Bush now maintains a 55% approval rating in Utah. According to Timothy Egan (2006), Utah appears to be the “reddest” (§ 1) state in the nation where most people stand by President Bush and his policies. In Utah, Bush took 72% of the presidential vote in 2004, with eight out of 10 voters in the state registered as Republicans (Egan). Egan explains that when the president’s rhetoric angers citizens or incites ridicule from other parts of the country, individuals in Utah interpret this rhetoric differently, understanding Bush’s messages as located within conservative religious and political views practiced by the populous: “They tend to be impressed by Mr. Bush’s faith and convinced that he understands their lives and values. They like what they see as his muscular foreign policy” (§ 5). In contrast to higher than national degrees of support for the war effort, reports LaPlante (2008b), military enlistment Utah is among the lowest in the nation and fell 17% between 2004 and 2007. This type of support was echoed recently by former 2008 presidential candidate, and LDS member, Mitt Romney. When asked about his son’s lack of Iraq War military service, he compared his sons’ service to his presidency bid with the sacrifice of those who serve in the military: “It’s remarkable how we can show our support for our nation, and one of the ways my sons are showing support for our nation is helping to get me elected, because they think I’d be a great president” (Luo, 2007, § 2). The majority of Utahns seem to endorse this stance. Lisa Riley Roche (2008) noted that while campaigning in Utah, Romney raised \$6 million and won 90% of the vote in state GOP presidential primary on February 5.

Unwavering support for President Bush and the Iraq War may ultimately have a profound effect on Utah’s anti-war protest scene. However, staunch support of war and conservative political leaders can also be explained through a historical context. Tracey Smith (1995) explained that Cache Valley and Utah State University in far-Northern Utah have been historically inactive in protest and acts of dissent. Smith’s

study of anti-war action on Utah college campuses during the Vietnam War reveal that protest on state higher education campuses maintained low levels of involvement, and lacked activity and conviction: “Zion could arguably be called the most conservative locale in the nation” (p. 3), a factor that, according to Smith, directly contributed to the failure of protest on university campuses, customary hotbeds for activism. According to Heather May (2006), “forty-five percent of poll respondents in Northern Utah said war protestors such as Sheehan and [former Salt Lake City Mayor] Anderson aid U.S. enemies” (¶ 3). May reports that only 27% of Utahans polled embrace the view that protests and protestors play an important role in the national debate over U.S. policy in Iraq. Although the right to discuss, criticize, and oppose the government is at the center of American political philosophy, Utah citizens attempting to march or rally in opposition to the war in Iraq and the Bush administration have been in the minority (Pember & Calvert, 2006). Consequently, political and/or traditional modes of protest may not be as effective in Utah due to its political and cultural ideological dominance by conservative attitudes.

Protest can be defined and categorized numerous ways, and can take diverse forms including strikes, boycotts, campaigns of defiance, riots, and civil disobedience (Crummey, 1986). According to James Jasper (1997), standard protests today “include large public rallies and marches, occupations of symbolic or strategic sites, provocative verbal and visual rhetoric, and more mainstream lobbying and electioneering” (pp. 5-6). Marco Giugni (2004) interpreted activism as people pursuing political goals through voting, lobbying, organizing, stating will in public opinion polls, and participating in movement activities. My study deviates from these “standard” (Jasper, p. 5) forms of protest and delves into the role artistic statements may serve in acts of dissent. Specifically, I examine how *Embedded*, a mass distributed war protest theatre/film written by anti-war activist Tim Robbins (2003), is interpreted by college students in the culturally and politically conservative climate of Cache Valley, Utah. As such, my research seeks to examine how Utah college students respond to an alternative form of protest, and how protest narratives such as those underlying *Embedded* may be interpreted by resistant audiences. Investigating how these college students, mostly conservative Republicans and devout members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon), respond to protest narratives highly critical of the Bush administration and the Iraq War, provides a deeper understanding of inter-relationships among political and religious affiliation and individuals’ interpretation of media that challenge core beliefs of such affiliations.

This study is situated within the context of moral protest and art as a tool for dissent. The possibility of theatre as an alternative, more socially acceptable tool for moral protest is widely accepted by theatre scholars who argue that the stage serves as a legitimate tool for social commentary (Colleran, 2003; Pottenger, 2001; Reston, 1985). Spectator response and the intersection of religious and political conservatism and artistic, creative anti-war protest situates my research within the broader context of contemporary art as protest. In other words, I seek to examine if a particular piece of theatre can be a legitimate medium for dissent, as argued by theatre scholars. The study includes two distinct stages: (1) An analysis of theatre critics' reviews of *Embedded* and, (2) an analysis of student essays written in response to viewing *Embedded*, explicating framing strategies and individual subjectivities that may indicate how anti-war theatre is interpreted on both a mass media and individual level.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Iraq War On Stage

People turn to film and music and art to assist them in contextualizing experience.

-Bruce Springsteen (2003)

The number of war depictions based on the Iraq War on stage and screen is increasing, and it seems likely that this trend will continue. As the war in Iraq continues to draw comparisons to Vietnam, and as the American public attempts to define the conflict in the Middle East, we can assume that theatre will play a notable role in making sense of the Iraq War, just as it did following American military action in Vietnam.¹ Theatre is already developing portrayals. Unlike Vietnam War plays, films, and art that were mainly produced in the years following the 1974 withdrawal from Saigon, Iraq War plays and films are being produced while the war continues. It may be some time before the public witnesses Broadway's complete version of the current war, but the theatre industry currently maintains an extensive catalog of pieces portraying various elements of the Iraq War, and has been the location for artistic versions of combat since the beginning of the conflict (Heilpern, 2006).

James Colleran (2003) argues that alternative forms of communication dissemination are needed for objective critiques of war. Colleran claims that theatre can serve this purpose: "Theatre can, against media hegemony, offer itself as a critical alternative, addressing issues and enacting perspectives that are otherwise unavailable" (p. 622). According to Colleran, theatre accomplishes such a critical analysis in number of ways. First, theatre acknowledges its own bias and attempts to introduce historical events within an analytical context (Colleran). Theatrical productions can, asserts Colleran, make a connection between what is happening in the conflict and at home in an intimate setting where actors and audience members interact. Further, the art of theatre itself maintains an atmosphere of support for critical thought and open expression (Colleran). Colleran argues that members of the theatre industry work closely in an environment where creative, dramatic displays of human emotion and controversial subject areas are welcomed and accepted. As a result, through use of staged representation, theatre can provide a viewpoint that is less constricted by pressure of loyalty to economic or interpersonal groups (Colleran). This may especially be the case in smaller, less commodified theatre spaces, such as those found in Off-Broadway

or Off-Off Broadway districts. Many theatre companies that produce social commentary work rely on grants and independent funding from non-profit, community, and artistic organizations. As such, this type of funding provides theatres with the means to produce socially relevant plays without dependence on corporate or governmental funds. Randy Gener (2008) writes that even though staged plays appeal to a narrower set of audiences than television and cinema, theatre's cultural meanings are "reinforced, ritualized, and naturalized by revival, repetition and performance" (p. 33). James Reston (1985) has argued that in the chaos and confusion within current American culture, the playwright can serve as a link between the ideal and reality while attempting to reconstruct a dislocated society.

Theatrical protests against America's involvement in Iraq have occurred throughout the United States and the world, with the largest and most visible activities occurring in New York City (Carlson, 2004). This should not be surprising since the city was the site of the terrorist attacks that led to the current mood and is also the center of America's theatre scene (Carlson). Much like NYC itself after September 11, most theatres in New York were closed for an extended period of time. When theatres in New York did re-open, scripts and productions did little to encourage expressions of recent events, even in the most experimental and non-commercial venues (Carlson). According to Marvin Carlson, most effort in theatre was expended to stimulate tourism and shopping. As a result escapist entertainment was used to lure audiences back to Broadway.

Beyond Broadway, a number of smaller theatres eventually presented readings of tributes to the victims of 9/11 or personal statements by survivors (Carlson, 2004). The first play resulting from the events of 9/11 was Anne Nelson's (2002) *The Guys*. Nelson's script is a tribute to the firefighters who died during the event. Although lacking overt political commentary, it does include reference to America's role in the events of the day (Carlson). The second script written by an American playwright attempting to interpret 9/11 was *The Mercy Seat*, by Neil LaBute (2002). Carlson argued that neither play gave much attention to the political or social aspects of the event, but rather, focused on the psychological effect on individual New Yorkers seeking to come to terms with what had happened. However, as the discussion began to shift to retaliation, theatre began to respond to a looming military invasion of Iraq.

The Desert on Stage

During the fall of 2002, protests and petitions against military action in Afghanistan, erosion of civil liberties in America, and the possibility of a war in Iraq were initiated (Carlson, 2004). The activist organization *Not in Our Name* began to sponsor theatre events to protest the direction Bush's War on Terror was taking (Carlson). The organization THAW (Theaters Against War) formed as a protest organization, and by February 2003 over a hundred theatres had joined the group (Carlson). On March 2, 2003 THAW organized an extensive and coordinated political statement against the Iraq War, which included performances, demonstrations, and readings opposing the Iraq invasion on Broadway, Off-Broadway, and Off-Off Broadway (Carlson). On March 3, over a thousand readings of the play *Lysistrata* took place in 52 countries and in every state in the United States (Carlson). The collective readings of the ancient anti-war play provided a global message of dissent through the vehicle of theatre (Elam, 2003). Harry Elam argues that the collective readings of *Lysistrata* represented a form of public advocacy simply through the thousands that expressed anti-war sentiment:

The fact that this ancient play can still comment on the meanings of a contemporary conflict adds certain legitimacy as well as poignancy to the social critique of the moment. Seen through the cultural lens of *Lysistrata*, this latest crisis marks a repetition of old problems: senseless, horrific wars have been going on for centuries. The play asks, however, how do we interrupt this cycle of violence? It offers a creative hope, a mindset for revolutionary change. (Elam, p. ix)

Thus, theatre reacted to the Bush administration's war on terror, and began to produce revolutionary theatre comparable to the 1960s (Carlson).

A diverse catalog of plays has been developing in response to the war, varying in topic and style. For instance, Heather Raffo (2004) is the creator and performer of the Off-Broadway production *Nine Parts of Desire*. Raffo is a solo performer, depicting contemporary Iraqi womanhood, commentary on the Hussein regime, and portraying how recent violence in her home country has destroyed Iraq. The script shows Iraq through the eyes of the black-veiled mothers and daughters of the country (Renner, 2005). This view of casualty and pain is rarely seen on the nightly news or on the front pages of newspapers. Rather, the perspective provides a face to the casualty statistics and a human element that seems lacking in other depictions (Renner):

Raffo trains us to see – as if for the first time – those women in black abaya who peer out from the margins of newspaper photographs: the mothers and daughters of Iraq’s scarred contemporary world, whose power to love is, in many ways, heightened by the tumult of their lives. (Renner, p. 1)

Raffo spent years working on this play, drawing from interviews of Iraqi women living in Iraq and outside of the country (Morales, 2004). She portrays more than six characters, all depicting different versions of oppressed women (Morales). According to Morales, *Nine Parts of Desire* could not be more relevant than it is in the current sociopolitical climate.

More recently, a number of Iraq War plays have attempted to open the Iraq conflict to critical discussion and interpretation through more assorted lenses. For example, a play entitled *Black Watch*, by Gregory Burke (2006), debuted at the University of Edinburgh in August 2006 to positive reviews. Burke’s “passionate and unguarded” (Gardner, 2006, ¶ 5) play is a view of men in the Black Watch Scottish Regiment who served in Iraq. Based on extensive interviews with men who fought in the Middle East for two tours, the production places the audience in the very heart of the war zone (Gardner). Presented by the National Theatre of Scotland, Gardner asserts that *Black Watch* is:

A mature and complex piece of political theatre – fierce, passionate and unguarded – that makes connections between what happens here with what happens there, indicts a government that so blithely squanders not only lives lost but all the things that make us human. (¶ 5)

The play made such an impact at Scotland’s Fringe Theatre Festival that it was the feature of the National Public Radio segment *All Things Considered*, on which Rob Gifford (2006) explained that the piece “digs deep into the morality of the war – and suggests a crisis within the British military” (¶ 2). Presented in New York during 2007, *Black Watch*, “took you inside its soldiers heads with an empathetic force” (Brantley, 2007, ¶ 8). According to *New York Times* theatre critic Ben Brantley, *Black Watch* is a play that changes perception.

Brantley (2007) praised *Black Watch* as “a necessary reminder of the transporting power that is unique to theater” (¶ 7). What is presented on stage are naturalistic scenes exposing the double-edged sensation of boredom and anticipation, the watching of mass bombings from a distance as if they were a sort of theater, the adolescent camaraderie and in-fighting, and the constant presence of the embedded news

media who seem to know more about what's happening to the soldiers than the soldiers themselves.

Accordingly, Brantley asserted that *Black Watch* exhibits the artistic methods that summon the urgency and immediacy only a theatrical production can exhibit when providing a glance at war.

Another play praised by critics is *Eyes of Babylon*, by Jeff Key (2006), a Marine veteran who served in Iraq. Based on Key's journals documenting his time in the war, *Eyes of Babylon* is staged by Israeli director Yuval Hadadi and co-produced by American Junction Productions. The single-performer play has been on tour for the past four years after initially opening in Los Angeles, and may be the first documentary drama to emerge from the war (Hurwitt, 2006). According to the *San Francisco Chronicle's* Sam Hurwitt, the play is "a first step in what is certain to be a long national healing process" (§ 1). Hurwitt wrote that the production is an essential piece of Iraq War interpretation: "Part of what makes *Babylon* an important piece, in fact, is the idiosyncrasy of Key's experiences, the honesty of his observations and the contradictions they contain" (§ 6).

Dying City (Shinn, 2006) is an Iraq War play that addresses the conflict from the perspective of those left behind following a soldier's death. The plot is focused around Kelly, the widow of recently deceased Craig, and his twin brother Peter, who has surprised Kelly with an impromptu visit. As the two discuss and reminisce their relationships through the night, they attend to the process of self-discovery. Brantley (2007) writes that *Dying City* is an "inwardly burrowing psychological drama, a portrait of a young war widow in New York and the men who have warped her life" (§ 5). According to Brantley, the play is a study of human nature and violence, and how they "pervade everyday lives" (§ 6). Craig materializes through Peter in flashbacks while the characters confront the issues of Abu Ghraib and September 11. Brantley (2007) called the piece "crafty and unsettling" (§ 1) while labeling Shinn as "among the most provocative and probing of American playwrights today" (§ 4).

Rajiv Joseph (2007), an Indian American playwright, produced a lesser-known play that provides a usually silent casualty of war a voice. Joseph's *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* is based on an event that took place early during the 2003 Iraq invasion. The protagonist and narrator of the play is a tiger who was shot and killed by a U.S. soldier. The tiger, according to Joseph, is a character much like other civilians, stuck in the wrong place at the wrong time. According to Choudhury (2007), the tale is "darkly-

comic” (§ 1) and is not a critical look at America forces. It is simply a critical examination of the absurdity of the situation (Choudbury).

Combat is not the only location theatre takes on Iraq. *Stuff Happens* (Hare, 2004) is an unblinking examination of the political motivations ultimately leading to the Iraq War. With characters based on key participants who created policy for invasion, including Bush, Blair, Rumsfeld, Cheney, Rice, and Powell, the plot is an amalgamation of factual news reports and fictional conversation, which take place behind closed doors (Brantley, 2007). Brantley describes the characters “less like destiny-shaping, arbitrary gods than like ego-trippers in your office” (§ 2). *Stuff Happens*, claimed Brantley, “seems less an arrogant, animated history book with a fixed agenda than a fluid public speculation – a collective work of imagination that attempts to grasp how and why an unnecessary and unwinnable war was allowed to happen” (§ 5).

Adding to the growing list of Iraq War plays is *Fallujah* (Holmes, 2007), a depiction of the 2004 assault on Fallujah, during which U.S. forces used aggressive strategy to re-establish control of the town following the massacre of four American contract workers, whose bodies were dragged through the streets and strung from a bridge (Perlez, 2007). According to Jane Perlez, Holmes uses eyewitness testimonies for the script and overpowering sound effects of rocket fire and helicopters to focus on the trauma of those trapped in the town. The script is based on accounts of soldiers, doctors, aid workers, and fleeing civilians who were involved or watching. Characters include Jo Wilding, a British anti-war activist who went to Iraq to perform as a clown and a freelance Canadian journalist, Dahr Jamail, whose accounts were used by Holmes to create the character Sasha, a television reporter (Perlez). Maintaining anti-war sentiment, the piece condemns action in Iraq and berates American policy. Perlez described *Fallujah* as “90 minutes of blanket violence and injustice” (§ 25).

A revival of *Journey's End* (Sherriff, 1928), a drama about British soldiers in the trenches of World War I, is the most recent war play produced addressing war, and its reception by critics and theatre patrons may be an indicator of the state of theatre based on conflict. According to Charles Isherwood (2007), the piece was the first play in modern memory to end a Broadway run on the very same day it was nominated for a Tony Award. *Journey's End* played to some of the smallest houses on Broadway this season despite critical acclaim, forcing theatre analysts to ponder the position of war theatre during a time

of continued action in Iraq. Isherwood claimed: “We may have finally reached a point where the old forms of war fiction are no longer capable of giving us the solace and understanding we look for from this kind of material” (§ 18). Conceivably, stories of noble sacrifice and uncomplicated moral climates of current stories seem unsuitable for the contemporaneous climate. If this is this case, *Embedded* may function as an alternative voice to theatrical examinations of conflict.

The Actors Gang and Embedded

Tim Robbins continues to play a part in liberal political commentary and anti-war lobbying, and has openly spoken out against the war in Iraq and government policy introduced after September 11. Robbins has been a critic of George W. Bush and has been a consistent target of criticism by conservative camps. He was accused of being unpatriotic, a Saddam supporter, and a protest junkie (Werner, 2003). Robbins’ activism spilled over into a widely publicized 2003 conflict with the president of the Baseball Hall of Fame, who accused Robbins of putting American troops in danger by criticizing the war effort before withdrawing Robbins’ invitation to Cooperstown for the fifteenth anniversary celebration of *Bull Durham* (Werner). Robbins founded the Actors’ Gang with a group of theatre friends from UCLA in 1981 (Werner). The company models their “edgy agitprop aesthetic” (Werner, § 23) on the raucous methods of the San Francisco Mime Troupe, while focusing on education. According to Actors’ Gang managing director Greg Reiner, while the group’s plays are somewhat outside the mainstream, challenging, and entertaining, education is a key element (Kennedy, 2004). Kennedy reports that while on tour, actors in the troupe conduct master classes and workshops for students. Robbins has held post-performance panel discussions with both professional journalists and high school students (Kennedy). The Actors’ Gang also hosts public forums, in which members discuss theatre as civic dialogue (Foster, 2006).

Robbins is also the writer and director of *Embedded* (in which he also performs), an anti-war play that opened in 2003, which focuses on the use of embedded reporters during the Iraq conflict. The script of *Embedded* began with Robbins’ speech to the National Press Club, during which he attempted to urge members of the media to use their power to report, rather than merely provide an avenue for the administration’s publicity (Werner, 2003). Afterwards, Robbins developed his message into an art form, the traditional method of choice by early playwrights with social motivations (Werner).

Louise Kennedy (2004) from *The Boston Globe* describes *Embedded* as a play using “broad satire, grotesque half-masks, and punk-rock sensibility to skewer the war and the media’s coverage of it” (¶ 1). According to Kennedy, the production has provoked strong reactions, big laughs, and an opportunity for education. However, the *New York Times*’ Robin Finn (2004) wrote that even though the play received three performance run extensions, professional critics “took their shots” and Robbins and *Embedded* (¶ 1). William LeJeunesse of *FOX News Network* (2003) charged the play with bad taste, while attempting to debunk *Embedded*’s portrayal of the Bush Administration and its rationale for war. In contrast, Jessica Werner (2003) of the *San Francisco Chronicle* contends that *Embedded* is a “very smart, very screwball and ultimately chilling comedy, dramatizing the interactions of journalists and U.S. troops during the invasion of Gomorrah, an oil-rich rogue state ruled by the Butcher of Babylon” (pp. 2-3). Robbins depicts sympathy for journalists and soldiers, as well as strong disdain for government leaders whose reasons for entering instigating a war in Iraq contribute to the public’s confusion about the conflict (Werner). The play examines the role of the embedded journalist in battle, and the discrepancy between the reporter’s view and the news the general public is shown (Werner). With *Embedded*, Robbins asserts his belief in the power of theatre as a tool for social commentary: “Theater is an extremely responsive medium. You can engage with the news and the stories that we’re being fed that are affecting our perceptions of the world right now. I think we are living in iconographic times” (cited in Werner, p. 4).

Responses to *Embedded* have been varied and mixed. The *Washington Post* reported that “even the left-leaning *New York Times* took Mr. Robbins to the theatrical woodshed for preaching to the choir” (Toto & Torrance, 2006). According to *The New York Times*’ James Finn (2004), professional critics compared *Embedded* to leftover sushi. Although *Embedded* consistently “garnered savage reviews” in its New York run, audience demand extended the play’s stint to 14 weeks (Kendt, 2004, ¶ 1). Commenting on the perception that *Embedded* has received unwelcome backlash, Robbins explains: “What I want to do is put the information out there and let people decide for themselves” (cited in Frey, 2005, ¶ 19). *Embedded* is perceived as an overt and confrontational piece of anti-war theatre, but Robbins’ primary motivation for producing the work is relatively benign:

I hope that people leave the theater in some kind of discussion. That would be my ideal. Whether they agree or not, I don't care. I hope they address some of the questions raised in the play. (cited in Barrett, 2004, ¶ 30)

Asked about the scathing tone of *Embedded* and the denunciations by media and critics, Robbins rationalized:

Listen, it's satire. And you can't be polite in a satire. It's also not a documentary, so people can take what they want out of it. Just come on down and see it and have an open mind. I'd like people to see it and judge for themselves what the play is about. (cited in Barrett, 2004, ¶ 34)

In Robbins' view, *Embedded* is a catalyst for open and uninhibited discussion and debate. According to Finn (2004), the "playwright did aim to provoke" (¶ 2).

Reduced to a synopsis, *Embedded* portrays elements of a war in the fictional state of Gomorrah against the Butcher of Babylon. The Biblical reference to Sodom and Gomorrah in Robbins' play is important to note. The recasting of the tale in *Embedded* (and on the larger global scale) of Saddam and Gomorrah suggests that the sins of tyranny as exhibited through Saddam Hussein were to be punished by the wrath of God, in this case, U.S. bombs dropped from the sky. In other words, the men under Saddam have been proven to be wicked, killing innocents by the thousands, committing political breaches by the score, and thus the coalition decided to destroy them. Like the Biblical city, for the people of the land, again there is no real escape, as the air strikes rain down fire and brimstone in the form of bombs and bunker busters, destroying everyone who happens to be in the way and everything sneaking underground. Set against the backdrop of a desert conflict, the play is a lampooned examination of numerous aspects of the Iraq War, including the political decisions made to appropriate force, and the effects such action have on soldiers, families, military leaders, and most directly, truth and reporting from journalists during the initial invasion. *Embedded* is arranged within a mosaic plot, interweaving vignettes of soldiers, families, politicians, propaganda constructed heroes, lap-dog journalists, and independent reporters.

Billed as a satire, the piece presents a collaged structure of several groups of characters, linked by the war in Gomorrah. Between sketches, *Embedded* consists of short blackouts filled with video scenes of actual war punctuated by strobe lights and booming protest songs. The first group of characters depicts soldiers and their families left behind. Through heartfelt goodbyes and tearful letters to and from the

battlefield, innocent individuals are portrayed in a naturalistic style, emphasizing the human toll of war. Both men and women march to battle for diverse reasons, whether it is National Guard duty or a means to pay for college. Meanwhile, spouses at home attempt to keep the family and the finances afloat. Throughout the soldier plot line, viewers see a soldier accidentally kill an Iraqi family suspected of being suicide bombers and the capture and celebrated rescue of Private Jen Jen Ryan, a female maintenance crewmember. Of course, even as an Iraqi doctor attempts to save her, the dramatization of the manufactured hero is used to revitalize patriotic fervor in the states. Jen Jen's story closely mirrors that of Jessica Lynch's ordeal in the desert, her capture, and the staged rescue that was used to re-invigorate waning American support for the war in Iraq. This storyline has become even more relevant. During Lynch's April 25, 2007 Congressional testimony, she admitted that her tale of heroism was false (Scelfo, 2007). Ultimately, the depiction of soldiers and families displays the face of those who fight and confront the brunt of war's nature.

The second group of characters provides a harshly satirical glimpse of the policy makers behind the war in Gomorrah. Thinly veiled to represent the Bush Administration, the likes of Gondola, Pearly White, Woof, Dick, and Cove make up the Office of Special Plans, which maintains a religious relationship with philosopher Leo Strauss. Wearing grotesque masks, the chorus celebrates and plans battle with forged nuclear documents, public relations campaigns, disregard for a protesting public, and orgasmic delight. Depicted as planning the date to invade by randomly choosing a day not filled with lunch plans and giving the president the opportunity to wear a flight suit and fly a plane, the Office of Special Plans is portrayed as inhuman marauders set on perfecting war in many different places.

Finally, *Embedded* also provides viewers with a musical account of the journalists who serve as information sources between soldiers, the public, and the Office of Special Plans. Sarcastically represented as literally dancing to the beat of the military's spin, the play's embedded reporters graciously follow the invasion of Gomorrah, cheer as the statue of The Butcher of Babylon falls, and answer to a musically inclined commanding officer in Colonel Hardchannel, the hardnosed censor who directs the theatre of war, or at least coverage of it. *Embedded* does offer viewers Stringer and Gwen, two veteran journalists who attempt independence in their reporting, offering darker dispatches and skeptical voices from the front.

These characters struggle to report the death and blood, mistakes and misinformation that their colleagues disregard.

Beyond *Embedded's* satirical format, the major difference between *Embedded* and other Iraq War plays is its accessibility. A live performance of the play is distributed in DVD format, creating an interesting combination of theatre and film. This mixture provides the background for my study: The use of mass produced theatre as social commentary. Both the accessibility of *Embedded* and the unconventional approach to the war narrative informs my research. *Embedded's* satirical structure makes the piece an overt attempt at dissent. Through critical scorn, irony, and amusement, the play strongly challenges the Iraq War, the embed program, and the political elites. Of course, satire has a tradition of strong critiques of power and culture, and *Embedded* provides an opportunity to study the genre's place in public and private discussion.

Reporting Iraq: Embedding

As previously described, one of *Embedded's* strongest and harshest critique is aimed at embedded journalists who reported the initial invasion of Iraq. Sanitization and self-censorship was a large concern when the embed program was instituted, and many journalists in Iraq did comment on the relative absence of news of people killed or injured in military action (Brookes, Mosdell, & Threadgold, 2006). Brookes et al. argued that although embeds were in Iraq to bring viewers closer to the battlefield, they failed to show the “ugly side” of war, limiting a clear picture of what the conflict is about (p. 101). Sanitization, according to Chris Hedges (2002), assists the public in “completely” losing touch with what war is (§ 19). Hedges emphasized:

And when we lose touch with what war is, when we believe that technology makes us invulnerable. That we can wage war and others die and we won't – then eventually, if history is any guide, we are going to stumble into a horrific swamp. (§ 19)

David Carr (2007) reported that since 2006, the military's embedding rules require that journalists obtain a signed release from a wounded soldier before the image can be published, and that “images that put a face on the dead, that makes them identifiable, are simply prohibited” (§ 4). According to Carr, until 2006, no

permission was needed to cover memorials of fallen soldiers, but now these events cannot be shown, even when the unit of the fallen invites coverage. Carr emphasizes:

When this war began, the government attempted to manage images by banning photographs of coffins returning to United States soil. If the government chooses to overmanage the wages of war in Iraq, there is a real danger that when this new generation of veterans, whose ranks grow everyday, could come home to a place where their fellow Americans have little idea what they have gone through. (¶ 27)

Hedges (2002) alleged that commercial news is an extension of the entertainment industry, and considers real conflict to be hidden by “the Rambo heroics we are fed by the state and media industry” (p. 87). As a result, deaths of both American soldiers and an incomprehensible number of Iraqis is hidden while the myth of war is perpetuated. According to Hedges:

The potency of myth is that it allows us to make sense of mayhem and violent death. It gives us justification to what is no more than gross human cruelty and stupidity. It allows us to believe we have achieved our place in human society because of a long chain of heroic endeavors rather than accept the sad reality that we stumble along a dimly lit corridor of disasters. (p. 23)

In other words, mythic war, asserts Hedges, sells papers and boosts ratings.

In October 2007, only 11 journalists were still embedded, and there had been no more than 25 embeds during previous months (Ricchiardi, 2007). Only a few media organizations are left with a full-time presence in Iraq (*New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *AP*), and maintaining coverage has become dangerous and costly (Ricchiardi). A May 5, 2008 report by Reporters Without Borders revealed that Iraq has cost 212 journalists and media assistants their lives since the beginning of the war in 2003. As such, Sherry Ricchiardi argues that “Americans are left without a complete account of a prolonged, bloody war that is devouring billions of taxpayers’ dollars” (p. 28). According to Ricchiardi, journalists are restricted when attempting to report independently or verify information from Pentagon briefings, while dangers of independent reporting in Iraq prevents more substantial information. Embedding is an alternative, but it offers a limited view restricted by the military (Ricchiardi). War is framed by taking all these things into account, which limits information being consumed by the public (Ricchiardi).

Frames and Framing

In my study of how professional critics and viewers of *Embedded* interpret the play's protest sensibilities, the concept of framing is considered within the contexts of both representing and interpreting messages. Two concepts of framing are detailed: media frames and individual frames. According to Todd Gitlin (1977), taking into account the link between individual and media lenses, frames "organize the world for both journalists who report it and, in some degree, for us who rely on their reports" (p. 7). Erving Goffman (1974) argued that when individuals recognize particular events, primary schemata or frameworks are used for interpretation. These frameworks, asserts Goffman, render "what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene to something that is meaningful" (p. 21). According to Goffman, these primary frameworks allow individuals to "locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences defined in its terms" (p. 21). Specifically, Goffman argued that social frameworks provide background for events, set "standards" for interpretation, and act as "continuous corrective controls for behavior" (p. 22). In other words, individual ideologies contribute to how persons make sense of the world. Gaye Tuchman (1978) saw these frames as windows through which "Americans learn of themselves and others, their own institutions, leaders, and life styles, and those of other nations and peoples" (p. 1). According to Tuchman, frames turn unrecognizable events or vague rhetoric into discernable items: "Without the frame, they would be incomprehensible sounds" (p. 192). William Gamson (1992) suggested that frames typically diagnose, evaluate, and prescribe action for negotiating reality.

More recently, individual frames have been defined as "mentally stored clusters of ideas that guide individuals' processing of information" (Entman, 1993, p. 53). In other words, individuals use already existing ideological allegiances to make sense of what they experience, while "defining," "diagnosing," "judging," and "remedying" a situation (Entman, p. 52). According to Entman, communicators, guided by frames, make conscious or unconscious decisions about how to organize their ideologies. The text contains frames, which are articulated by the presence or absence of images, words, phrases, and sources that provide reinforcement of judgments (Entman). An increase of salience, asserts Entman, "enhances the probability that receivers will perceive the information, discern meaning and thus process it and store it in

memory” (p. 54). In other words, relevance of a message is a critical factor in how individuals interpret information, which may or may not align with the communicator’s intention (Entman). Accordingly, receivers may rely on cultural and/or social groupings in their understandings of discourse with a message. Culture, argued Entman, is “the stock of commonly invoked frames,” and may be defined by a group of common frames that are displayed by individuals’ activities in the social reality (p. 53). This concept is especially relevant to my study of how students within Northern Utah culture frame *Embedded*.

Joseph Cappella and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1997) argued that “framing provides context that in turn activates prior knowledge,” which, when combined with the text, produce an understanding of that text neither can supply alone. In other words, framing serves as an explicit context within which messages are interpreted and information recalled. In essence, framing provides a way to think about events. Dietram Scheufele (1999) argued that framing is categorized as “social constructivism,” in which “people’s information processing and interpretation are influenced by preexisting meaning structures or schemas” (p. 105). Similarly, Michael Ryan (2004) argued that individuals correspond sections of reality into frameworks to make sense of them. Ryan specified that personal prejudices, past experiences, religious affiliations, values, and education contribute to constructing frames that assist in creating social reality.

Accordingly, Gitlin (1980) asserted that people are restricted to know only small aspects of social life, and as such, they rely on frames produced by media “for concepts, for images of their heroes, for guiding information, for emotional charges, for recognition or public values, for symbols in general, even for language” (p. 1). Focusing on media frames, Gitlin specified that frames enable journalists to quickly and routinely process large amounts of information, assign it to categories, and package it for audiences. Allan Rachlin (1988) argues that individuals rely on media to provide information about facets of the world when other immediate knowledge is available. Accordingly, reliance on media is influenced by the structure of society and an individual’s place within that structure. Like the majority of the population, journalists “have been socialized, like most of us, within our culture” (p. 12). As such, Rachlin asserted that media practitioners are subject “to the same forces that press upon the rest of us in our work and daily life,” and “have been exposed to the same constellation of understandings and values as most of us” (p. 12). Therefore, Rachlin stressed that it is important to recognize media’s immersion in the “totality of social relationships, both influenced by and influencing the history of our social relationships,” while

interrogating media's hegemonic construction of reality (p. 3). Media frames, according to Entman (1993), offer individuals methods to make sense of complex information. Entman summarized media framing as essentially involving selection and salience:

To frame is to *select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation* for the item described [original italics]. (p. 52)

To define problems, frames “determine what a casual agent is doing with what costs and benefits, usually measured in terms of common cultural values” (p. 52). Frames diagnose causes by “identifying the forces creating the problems,” make moral judgments by evaluating “casual agents and their effects,” and suggest remedies by offering and justifying “treatments for the problems and predict their likely effects” (p. 52).

Yet another important element of media framing is omission. According to Entman (1993), as frames shift focus to specific aspects of reality, they can also direct attention away from others. According to Entman: “Most frames are defined by what they omit as well as include, and the omissions of potential problems, definitions, explanations, evaluations, and recommendations may be as critical as the inclusions in guiding the audience” (p. 54). In elaborating on omission, Entman stresses how excluding items in frames significantly narrows possible interpretations, providing little information about alternatives that may be available to assist individuals in locating, comprehending, and interpreting the complications of reality. Kevin Carragee and William Roefs (2004) have argued that the interaction between social movements and the news media provides a valuable location to examine the relationship between framing processes and hegemony. Hence, it is this relationship between media and social movements, or protest, that provides the framework for the initial section of my study.

Framing Social Protest

Gitlin (1980) argued that mainstream media “process” (p. 5) activism. In other words, Gitlin asserted that media outlets and journalists control and diffuse the image they create of protest, and ultimately “absorb what can be absorbed into the dominant structure of definitions and push the rest to the margins of social life” (p. 5). In a study analyzing press coverage of antiwar activities by the Students for a

Democratic Society (SDS), Gitlin found that reporters narrowed, simplified, and demonized the group's efforts. Gitlin asserts that coverage focused on the event not the issue, conflict rather than the consensus, and the story rather than the explanation. Additionally, reporters concentrated on spokespersons, whose appearances and actions were consistent with what a protest leader should look like and how she should act. In other words, Gitlin argues that reporters focused on the perception that protest leaders are bombastic, divisive, parading, costumed, and disruptive. Journalists, according to Gitlin, make social protests more understandable by relating the vitality and spirit of action through celebrity spokespersons. In essence, the group's goals and ideas are less important than the riveting story (Gitlin). According to Gitlin (1977), media coverage of protest plays a defining role in specifying which groups, voices, and perspectives are legitimate, and which are not.

Protest groups, argue Douglas McLeod and James Hertog (1999), "are inherently important to society" (p. 309). Protest groups raise important issues, encourage critical questioning, champion reform, initiate social change, and contribute in the marketplace of ideas (McLeod & Hertog). However, McLeod and Hertog argue that even if the attitudes and treatment of protestors by those in power, the general populace, and mass media serve as indicators of "democratic vitality" (p. 309), when protestors challenge the status quo, they are often subject to hostile response from authorities, the public, and the media.

Douglas McLeod and Benjamin Detenber (1999) identify three processes of how mass media cover protest. Examinations of news content show that stories about protests "tend to focus on protestors' appearances rather than their issues, emphasize violent actions rather than their social criticism, pit them against police rather than their chosen targets, and downplay their effectiveness" (McLeod & Detenber, p. 3). Joseph Chan and Chin-Chuan Lee (1984) labeled this kind of coverage as the "protest paradigm" (p. 183), which creates a tense dynamic between mass media outlets and activists. According to McLeod and Detenber, as long as protestors provide appealing images, journalists will cover protest events and activist groups will be placed in an uneasy position. For example, extreme or unconventional behavior on the part of protestors attracts media coverage, yet the results in news reports focus on deviant and criminal behavior, negating issues raised by activists (Gitlin, 1977).

The first process through which protest groups' activities are called into question is delegitimization (McLeod & Hertog, 1999). Examples of delegitimization include paraphrasing of

protestor's statements used in news coverage or the absence of a protestor's voice in media accounts. A second style of protest coverage is marginalization, in which media accentuate the deviance of the protestors from the mainstream public, downplay the size and effectiveness of the protest, and apply a very narrow definition of what constitutes a successful protest. Yet another process outlined by McLeod and Hertog is demonization, in which the media exaggerate the potential threat of the protest. For example, in their analysis of coverage of anarchist protests, McLeod and Hertog found that flag burning was a prominent portion of coverage, which emphasized the distance between protestors and the general populace.

How media frame protest has important implications for the protest group, for the movement, and most importantly how the group is perceived by media audiences (McLeod & Hertog, 1999). McLeod and Detenber examined effects of television news coverage of anarchist protest and found that media support of officials had significant effects on viewers. According to McLeod and Detenber, mediated support for officials led viewers to be more critical of protestors, less likely to identify with the movement, less critical of the police, and less likely to acknowledge dissenters' rights to voice opposition. Support of the "status quo" also manufactured lower expectations of the protest's effectiveness, public support, and perceptions of newsworthiness (p. 3).

McLeod and Hertog (1999) have identified a number of diverse frames used by mass media outlets, all of which can be used in combination or singularly to depict social unrest. Although not an exhaustive list, McLeod and Hertog specify four categories of frames used to categorize protest groups: (1) marginalizing frames, (2) mixed frames, (3) sympathetic frames, and (4) balanced frames. Common marginalizing frames include the violent crime story, which emphasizes violent acts committed by dissenters, the "carnival frame," which depicts protestors as performers engaging in theatrical entertainments, the "freak show," which emphasizes the oddities of the protestors, the "storm watch" frame, warning the public about the threat posed by protestors, and the "moral decay" frame, which portrays protestors as examples of general social decay (pp. 312-313). McLeod and Hertog do specify groups of frames (e.g., sympathetic, mixed, balanced) that are less one-sided against protestors, yet also emphasize they are rarely used by mainstream media.

Shanto Iyengar (1991) summarized public perception of dissent by stressing that the general populace is tolerant of dissent when it is framed as a democratic right, yet when protest is framed with specific attention on dissenting groups, tolerance by the public is significantly less. Indeed, as anti-war movements take aim at protesting military action, dissenters are subject to marginalization, demonization, and delegitimization through numerous journalistic frames, ultimately working to curtail tolerance by the mainstream audience. According to Narasimhan Ravi (2005), war presents the largest challenge to journalists as they report military action abroad and domestic pressure and debate at home. The most dynamic tension, argues Ravi, is between patriotism and the professional practices of fairness and critical examination of official accounts. In the wake of September 11, 2001, the heightened sense of vulnerability felt by U.S. citizens enhanced this tension, which was translated to media coverage of events leading to the Iraq War (Ravi). As high public support for military retaliation for the criminal acts on September 11 shifted to governmental approval of the Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution of 2002, political elites approved invasion of Iraq by a 296 to 133 vote in Congress and by a 77 to 23 margin in the Senate (Ravi). As war in Iraq became imminent, anti-war protestors faced a significant challenge in maintaining the democratic ideal of active dissent while avoiding the application of protest paradigm frames by mainstream media.

Framing Iraq War Protests

On February 15, 2003, millions of people in Amsterdam, Barcelona, Cologne, London, Madrid, Paris, Rome, and numerous other European cities turned out to protest the United State's determination to invade Iraq (Mausbach, 2007). Dardis (2006) noted that during political and global debate over the decision to go to war, anti-war war protest groups "took to the streets to voice their opposition," an activity dissenters continued to take part in long after the war "officially" ended (p. 117). Even as millions of protestors in hundreds of cities around the world have continued to show strong opposition to the continued war in Iraq, anti-war voices have hardly caused a "ripple" in public discourse about the occupation (Mausbach, p. 60). As discussed, research has shown that media coverage of social protest supports the argument that protestors are consistently marginalized in press reports, while journalists tend to support the status quo (e.g., Chan & Lee, 1984; Gitlin, 1980; McLeod & Hertog, 1999; Watkins, 2001). This same

pattern continues in media framing of anti-war protest (Dardis). In an interview with Amy Goodman (2003), *CNN*'s Aaron Brown argued that once the war began, oppositional voices were irrelevant. Summarizing a mass protest across over 11 U.S cities, Bill Moyers (2007) reported that less than two-minutes of coverage was featured in the national news and *The New York Times* failed to run a story. During a two-week study of news coverage of the buildup to the invasion of Iraq, Steve Rendall and Tara Broughel (2003) from Fairness and Accuracy in Journalism (FAIR) reported that of 393 interviews featured on ABC, CBS, NBC, and PBS about the war, three were considered an anti-war voice.

Ravi (2005) argued that although media coverage plays a significant role in how anti-war protests are interpreted, other factors are involved with public perception of dissent and war. For example, Ravi emphasized that national sentiment and patriotism are elements influencing coverage: "Even those who oppose the war mute their voices once it starts lest they should be accused of giving comfort to the enemy" (p. 59). According to Dardis (2006), the anti-war position is confused with the perception that activists are diminishing troops' personal efforts, and as such the responsibility to justify protest has shifted to activists who are now marginalized by counter-protests, who claim the slogan "support the troops" (p. 121).

With the anti-war movement in Vietnam frequently labeled by members of the political and media elite as anti-troop, popular memory about the intentions and conduct of anti-war protestors has sustained a hostile response to activists (Beamish, Molotch, and Flacks, 1995). According to Thomas Beamish et al., "elite interests and media conventions helped reconstruct anti-war protestors as a negative force" (p. 356). Placing their research within a broader context, Beamish et al. stressed that as "opportunities for new wars and new kind of wars" emerge, elites and domestic opposition members will continue to strive to shape public opinion and perception (p. 356). As such, the ability to define and redefine protest movements according to public memory and current public sentiment is an important tool for elites who make war and report the nature of conflict (Beamish et al.).

Recent research of anti-war protest reveals continuing problematic media coverage of dissent. Attempting to understand media coverage of anti-war protest within a more current context, Ronald Bishop (2006) asks the question: "What news frames of protest activity have emerged from newspaper coverage of protests against the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq?" (p. 41). While Bishop found that traditional framing elements were used to cover anti-war protests, a group of new frames emerged. According to Bishop, in

the weeks following the September 11 attacks, journalists framed the anti-war movement as more cautious, more peaceful, and limited to college campuses. Bishop interprets this framing device as “domestication – docile, cooperative protestors who want to get their message out, but want to do it without challenging authority” (p. 43). Accordingly, within the domestication frame, media coverage interprets activists as lacking strength and aggressiveness, while being too willing to cooperate with authorities to have a substantial impact (Bishop).

Similar to what Beamish et al. (1995) discovered in their research of Gulf War protest coverage, Bishop (2006) demonstrated that protestors voicing opposition to the Iraq War were framed as modeling the Vietnam War protest tradition. According to Bishop, by referring to the past, reporters “enabled President Bush to ram home the point that protestors were outside the mainstream,” muting the protest by failing to recognize consistent opposition to government policy (p. 45). Another frame used by journalists was ambivalence, in which reporters suggested that protestors struggled with their opposition to the war, attempted to navigate the line between protesting and respecting the victims of September 11, and grappled with the supposed failure of anti-Vietnam War activism. A key theme found by Bishop was journalistic charges that protestors were not patriotic. Bishop asserts that activists and supporters were portrayed simplistically, emphasizing the acceptance and denial of protestors by the general populace and focusing on the conflict between the two groups while stressing reactions by war proponents. Bishop argues that reporters were unwilling to challenge the “protest means that you don’t support the troops” concept: “Thus, those who opposed the war were automatically in a defensive position” (p. 47).

According to Bishop (2006), coverage of protest also revealed a selfishness frame, “in which protestors were depicted as self-indulgent – the ‘me’ generation and the baby boomers fresh from the therapist’s couch” (p. 48). Reporting protestors as personally driven rather than politically motivated to participate undermines activism by portraying it as “just another entry on a resume, or a stop on a tour – something to do, rather than something to actually believe in” (Bishop, p. 49). In addition, Bishop found that journalists discussed protests as maintaining a wide array of people and organizations, encouraging the impression that the antiwar movement was too broad or too diverse to be effective: “Reporters discounted protestors’ ability to rally a variety of people to their cause; instead, they focused on how this variety might make it difficult to achieve their goals” (p. 50). Bishop argues that generalizations by the press depicted

diverse groups as simply attending events to get their personal message out, and that the protest movement was diluted by such generalizations (Bishop).

Bishop (2006) noted that as the war in Iraq became imminent, “reporters wrote more frequently about themselves,” summarizing how they had failed to provide sufficient coverage of opposition, and how protest groups manipulated the media to spread their message (p. 51). According to Bishop, reporters implemented the “self-reflexivity” frame, profiling tactics and strategies used by protesting groups: “It was never made clear if protestors actually mastered how to attract the media, only that they had to learn how to do it” (p. 52). Interestingly, Bishop’s analysis of the media’s self-reflexive frame elaborates celebrity participation in the protest spotlight, specifically noting protest actions by Tim Robbins and Susan Sarandon. As Tim Robbins plays a significant role in my examination of his play, it is of note that Bishop found coverage of Robbins’ role in antiwar activities to be both positive and negative. Bishop notes that Sarandon and Robbins may have raised awareness of the issue, but journalists focused on their roles rather than on the matters of war.

Lastly, Bishop (2006) proposes that media coverage marginalized Iraq War protest groups by reporting “fits and starts,” portraying activists as scattered, small, poorly organized, and fluctuating in active dissent (p. 53). Essentially, Bishop suggests that the ineffectiveness of protest against the Iraq War was a result of a combination of media framing and protestor shortcomings. According to Bishop, reporters treated activists as an anomaly that “appeared out of nowhere,” rather than an “ongoing journey of truth” (p. 57). Bishop argues: “It is as if journalists place themselves and protestors in competing, though never touching, rhetorically drawn zones” (p. 57). However, protestors share the blame, as “they are as self-reflexive and media conscious as the reporters who cover them” (Bishop, p. 57). Protestors and the government are forced together by journalists to form what Bishop labels “social drama,” a story that marginalizes any protest movement, and restricts antiwar activism to “going through largely anachronistic, largely fruitless motions” (p. 57).

Film Critics and Framing

According to Michael Ryan (2004), human beings fit reality into categories and frameworks that make sense to them, and as such, past experiences, prejudices, religious and personal values, education, and

political affiliations all contribute to the framing of social reality. Ryan pointed out that those who construct frames for others also rely on these attributes to make sense of reality. Drawing on Entman's (1993) distinction between individual frames and media frames, Ryan stipulates that media frames help individuals create personal frames "as they provide pertinent bits of information or news" (p. 365). Ryan posited: "They often create or stress central ideas that assign meaning to events and they help determine which events are salient" (p. 365). Salience, according to Entman, works to draw attention to specific aspects of a message, "thus making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences" (p. 53).

Although specifically referring to journalists as primarily functioning to frame social reality, in an earlier study Ryan (2001) asserted that editorial writers frame personalities, events and issues in the same ways that reporters and editors do, yet remain significantly less restricted by the constraints of traditional journalistic norms of objectivity. Accordingly:

This perceived freedom allows them greater latitude in framing their editorials, which may be more compelling since competing or contradictory symbolic narratives presumably not be presented – unless the editorial writers choose to attack those stories. (M. Ryan, 2004, p. 365)

In an analysis of how newspaper editorial writers from 10 of the United States' largest newspapers framed the war on terrorism, M. Ryan (2004) found that opinion writers reflected the newspaper's official stance, failing "to present in their editorials an important, opposing side of a critical issue" (p. 378). According to Ryan, the framing practice, and reliance on the organization's official stance by editorial writers in this instance is problematic: "To pretend alternatives do not exist, even when those alternatives are enumerated elsewhere on the opinion page, may not serve readers best, even during times of terrible crisis" (p. 378).

Michael Ryan (2004) notes that newspapers perceive that they create the organizational production of their own frames. Yet, following an examination of journalistic and editorial frames used in newspapers to interpret the war on terrorism, Ryan concluded that the narrative implemented by newspaper coverage and editorial writing followed that of the Bush Administration's arguments. Ryan asserts that editorial writers supported the official voice of political elites, failed to present a broader discussion about terrorism after September 11, and did not address the results of potential military action by U.S. forces, ultimately compromising their responsibility to the American public.

Indeed, M. Ryan (2004) suggested that opinion writers frame events according to their own individual ideologies much in the same way Judy Williamson (1992) argued that film critics approach reviewing films: “Film criticism seems self-evidently to be about films. But it is also about ideologies, taken-for-granted attitudes towards our society and its cultural forms” (p. 14). Williamson also accounts for the manner in which film criticism is “linked into a very specific network of distributors, exhibitors, and publications,” which is influential in how reviewers and filmmakers interact and accomplish their chosen objectives. In other words, much like M. Ryan (2004) argued that editorial writers rely on official sources and the narratives of their respective newspapers, and Williamson’s assertion of ideological and political influences of movie reviewers, I argue that reviewers also rely on a number of institutional actors and processes in rendering critiques of films. According to Williamson, ideologies and the political maneuverings behind film criticism complicates the perception that “criticism is about individuals interacting with a particular ‘artistic’ work and then pronouncing its merit” (p. 14). Williamson adds: “One could say that critics’ judgments are seen as at once totally personal, and yet – paradoxically – profoundly objective” (p. 15). For instance, in her review of the Vietnam War film *Platoon*, Williamson critiqued more than the artistic methods use to create a picture of Vietnam. Rather, Williamson provided an ideological foundation for why *Platoon* surfaced in 1987. According to Williamson, *Platoon* represented “a sense of unease, an escalation of national guilt which has as much to do with the Contra atrocities in Central America as with Vietnam” (p. 73). Williamson also noted how the film corresponded “to some national search for a discourse of purging and healing; a way of, precisely, confessing and remaining innocent at the same time” (pp. 73-74). In essence, Williamson evaluated *Platoon* within the context of current ideological struggles, complicating the film’s place in the cinematic catalogue.

Williamson (1992) insisted that the majority of critics in mainstream media hold to a vague notion of how to measure traditional artistic worth. As such, reviewers and critics consistently rule out taking more experimental or unconventional attempts of film seriously (Williamson). Thus the reviewing process also denies audiences access to structures through which they might make their own judgments and decisions about a work’s artistic merit (Williamson). In short, reviewers limit expansion of cinematic experimentation and expression while narrowing viewers’ ability to discern a work’s artistic worth according to their own existing tastes and preferences. Much in the same way Ryan (2004) understands

editorial writers' support of dominant ideologies of the power structure, Williamson interprets film reviewers as producing "precisely the political ideology we have habituated ourselves to in the so-called Western democracies" (p. 19). As Entman (1993) suggested, frames define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies. Ultimately then, reviewers implement personal frames based on ideologies to create media frames to influence potential viewers in assigning a work's artistic merit, and legitimizing or delegitimizing unconventional production techniques. Audiences then rely on their ideologies to frame and interpret messages.

According to Robert Wyatt and David Badger (1990), reviewers in the mass media constitute a more "pervasive journalistic phenomenon" than originally perceived (p. 360). Wyatt and Badger argued that even as reviews are consistently considered to be in the same category as editorials, reviewing is an example of "evaluative journalism," a broader genre of news reporting (p. 360). Wyatt and Badger specify two characteristics that distinguish evaluative journalism from opinion writing. First, reviewers provide an immediate news function, presenting basic factual information about a forthcoming event prior to being experienced by audience members. Second, reviewers simultaneously present a personal evaluation of the quality of a work. In contrast, editorials and analyses are "conventional forms of rhetoric that usually consist of arguments intended to change readers' views" or present information intended to broaden perspectives for better understanding of an issue (Wyatt & Badger). Evaluative journalism is distinctive because the writer's evaluations are the result of tastes and preferences, both personal and individualistic: "While opinion possesses a prominent cognitive dimension, taste or judgment is far more affective and visceral" (Wyatt & Badger, p. 361).

Alice Hall (2001) emphasized that audiences do not consume entertainment media in isolation, and suggests that popular culture, such as films and television programs are supplemented by other texts, including reviews, news stories, and advertisements. Hall specifically outlined how newspaper, television, and internet reviews function to help viewers decide whether or not to see a film while providing frames that are "likely to shape at least how some viewers interpret and respond to the films they choose to see" (p. 401). According to Hall, reviewers represent an example of "society's intellectuals" who assist audiences in understanding the perspectives and information embodied in film, and as such, they have potential to

“contribute to the media’s role in maintaining existing belief systems or encouraging social change” (p. 402).

According to Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery (1985), countless numbers of film reviews have been published in magazines, books, newspapers, and television, and it is undetermined whether critical discourse on the cinema has affected film-viewing behavior. Allen and Gomery argued, however, that critical examinations of films traditionally serve two primary functions. First, critical examination of films maintains an agenda-setting function, that is, reviews have not told viewers what to think, but what to think about. Second, critiques establish boundaries of what is considered acceptable in cinematic production and what films are outside reasonable societal boundaries (Allen & Gomery). As such: “These limits are exposed when critics are confronted with a film that is ‘different,’ and that doesn’t fit neatly into the customary frames of reference of standard critical discourse” (p. 90).

Related to my analysis of critical discourse of *Embedded*, Allen and Gomery (1985) make an important distinction between theatre and film when addressing audience behavior as it may be affected by reviewer evaluation. According to the researchers: “Certainly, no movie reviewer has ever had the power to ‘kill’ a picture in the way, it is said, certain theater critics can ruin a Broadway play’s chances for commercial success” (p. 90). This is critical for several reasons. First, *Embedded* is a hybrid piece of theatre, a combination of film and stage presented in DVD format. For my analysis, I locate *Embedded* as a representation of the “different” type of media narrative Allen and Gomery and Williamson (1992) refer to when considering how reviewers assign boundaries to legitimate and illegitimate forms of film. Thus, it is important to examine how critics assign *Embedded* its place within or outside acceptable cinematic/theatrical boundaries. Allen and Gomery do stress the importance of examinations of film reviews, as research in this area is valuable in determining the “vocabulary” used by film critics and audience members. Just as Allen and Gomery suggest that examining film reviews is critical for understanding cinematic and viewer interpretations of film, an analysis of *Embedded* reviews is critical for articulating how critics frame a unique piece of protest theatre presented as film.

Examinations of how film reviews may affect viewers’ conceptions of films have been conducted in order to discern the influence critics’ judgments have on perceptions of movies. In laboratory experiments, Wyatt and Badger (1987) examined student responses to a film following exposure to various

types of reviews, including positive, mixed, negative, and a descriptive “non-review” (p. 21). Wyatt and Badger found that the positive review and the non-review are rated significantly more interesting than the negative and mixed reviews. In other words, viewers are more apt to consider a film or event interesting if the reviews are positive or informative. In a later study, Wyatt and Badger (1990) reported that mixed reviews, positive reviews, and non-reviews all increase viewer interest in a film in a similar ratio, while only negative reviews have a stronger effect on viewer interest in watching. As such, Wyatt and Badger posited that embellishment and extensive adjectives fail to attract more interest than a review that relies on the description for evaluation. It is the negative review that has the most effect in discouraging viewers.

Hall’s (2001) examination of film reviews of *The Siege* investigated how critics framed the film’s representation of Arabs and the controversy surrounding these depictions. Following a qualitative analysis of the types of justifications and support popular film critics used in their evaluation of *The Siege*, Hall explicated three dominant themes underlying the reviews: (1) film’s relationship to real-world events, (2) intentions of the film’s creators, and (3) constraints of the genre. According to Hall, film critics commonly referred to Arabic or Muslim initiated terrorist attacks within the United States to assist viewers’ grasp the film’s plot. In their reviews, critics emphasized the topicality of the film’s realism and plausibility. Reviewers also attempted to attribute the meaning behind the film to the producer and director, a convention that Hall argues is common. This action placed the intent of the filmmaker’s representation of Arabs at the center of the debate rather than the broader discussion of problematic representations. In evaluating the film, critics considered what the director tried to do or say through the film. Multiple reviewers also discussed the constraints of the action film genre as an element that contributed to how critics interpreted what factors might influence the expectations an audience might have on the film’s larger impact. According to Hall, critics considered the “heavy” themes to be at odds with the lighter genre. Reviewers determined that the abstract issues within the action genre required that different measurement standards be applied to this film.

Hall (2001) concluded that there are several mechanisms through which reviews may shape audience reactions to a film. By emphasizing different issues or certain criteria over others, media coverage may shape viewers’ opinions of a film. Hall contends that entertainment reviews can perpetuate negative stereotypes, in the case of Arabs, by omitting discussions of controversial media images and

excluding opposing voices who object to these negative images. Ultimately, Hall argues that “intensive ideological analysis” is not a part of a reviewer’s work, yet although film critics may be limited by time and organizational structures, Hall emphasizes that reviews can have effects on audiences’ comprehension of ideological issues (p. 419).

Karin Wilkins and John Downing (2002) examined how news coverage of *The Siege* engaged with the film’s portrayal of Arab and Muslim characters and the surrounding controversy between protesting groups and the film’s producers. While protesting groups responded to the film as an example of consistent negative depictions of Arabs in popular culture, the scriptwriter, who considers himself an advocate for Arab groups, argued that the film does not perpetuate stereotypes as other texts do. Wilkins and Downing analyzed news coverage of the debate and found that “while the protests were successful in gaining attention, their concerns were not sympathetically addressed by most of the reviews” (p. 430). The groups critiquing *The Siege* were able to gain attention in news reports, film reviews, and editorials, and most of the coverage of protesting groups’ concerns was mixed and became more sympathetic in editorials and news articles over time. However, according to Wilkins and Downing, coverage may have perpetuated the problematic stereotypes protesting groups were attempting to counter. Wilkins and Downing argue that “much of the discussion reinforced the notion that Arab and Muslim communities are equivalent, and that this monolithic group acts in violent retaliation” (p. 431).

In their analysis of critics’ reviews of Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, Daniel Stout, Joseph Staubhaar, and Gaye Newbold (1999) suggested: “The fact is that hundreds of thousands will not see the play [*Angels in America*] firsthand, but will rely on interpretations of critics in the mass media for a summary as well as an opinion about the play’s content and theme” (p. 136). In examining how theatre critics framed *Angels in America*, Stout et al. attempted to analyze how reviewers interpreted Mormon characters in the play and how their interpretations were framed for the public. Stout et al. argue that the way reviewers perceive Mormons in the play and within the broader populace has a great deal to do with “how media organizations filter information through critics, editors, and marketing managers before it is finally conveyed to the public” (p. 134). In their analysis, Stout et al. studied the information media gatekeepers communicated and omitted about Mormons, in essence, attempting to gain understanding about how media filters information regarding religious groups that are “undergoing the process of cultural

integration” (p. 135). Stout et al. found a balance between positive and negative mentions of Mormons by critics, but the researchers stressed:

While the LDS community may have some cause to be concerned over the impression that *Angels in America* gives of Mormons, as reflected by its reviewers, the play evoked positive acceptance of a great deal of Mormon history and imagery. (p. 156)

Accordingly Stout, et al. claimed that although reviewers may not have portrayed Mormons within a preferred context, research added insight into how the religion and its members are framed in media.

Examination of reviews and the possible effects they may have on viewers provide a solid foundation for my analysis of critics’ reviews of *Embedded*. Hall (2001) asserted that as reviewers grappled with racial representation in *The Siege* and the correlating controversies and contradictions, critics “were forced to articulate expectations and evaluations about fairness, responsibility, and the role of media in shaping viewers’ perceptions of social groups” (p. 402). This statement emphasizes the significance of interrogating critics’ reviews in order to understand how media interpret and possibly shape the perception of groups taking part in performance protest.

Utah, Mormons, War, and Anti-war Protest: Then

To grasp fully the relationship between Mormon attitudes and war, some historical context is required. In a 1982 article for the LDS publication *Sunset*, Ronald Walker (1982) addressed the relationship between Mormon leadership and war. According to Walker, Mormon Church leaders have increasingly perceived military service as a religious obligation and state support as a virtue. Walker argues that Mormons strongly support the powers that be in war and peace, and that the need to sustain civil authority reflects the “unusual reverence” LDS faithful give to the land of “it’s birth” (p. 53). Walker emphasized:

More than a homeland, America is a promised land, possessed of a holy history and sacred future. God ordained the Constitution. Thus by deifying its past and future and declaring its government divinely instituted, Mormons view the defense of the United States as a holy venture. (p. 53)

Walker argued that although Mormon leaders have ambiguous and varied interpretations of war and religiosity, a consistent pattern of state allegiance has become so dominant that it has denied wartime

accountability for church members, and ceded immediate and ultimate responsibility for support of decisions regarding war. As America evolved into a more secular state, the concept of a Mormon theocracy faded and LDS civil loyalties became firmly attached to the American government (Walker). In other words, increasing nationalism and internationalism of the church required automatic and dispassionately neutral military and government compliance. Walker asserts that Mormonism's gradual conciliation with prevailing Americanism, combined with protection of the church's mission and doctrine stressing personal salvation, has led to dutiful support of national wars. As such, "man's duty is to obey his government, whatever its virtue," and by emphasizing personal purity rather than social responsibility, while placing culpability for war upon government leaders, the focus shifts to "a combatant's purposes of heart and resulting conduct rather than the wartime issues of the moment" (p. 54). Walker argues that LDS members maintain an unsteady attitude towards war, and even a high degree of apathy vis-a-vis the issue of individual conscience versus social duty.

According to Pierre Blais (1984), commentator in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, members of the LDS Church "tend to give overwhelming priority to ideological explanations in international affairs, omitting the more revealing domestic and socioeconomic context" involved in United States' relationships with other regimes (p. 63). As such, Blais argues that this lack of awareness, compounded by "general malleableness of the Mormon community," is reflected in support of government leaders who do not adversely affect the LDS community (p. 63). Blais emphasized that the LDS mind-set can be easily manipulated by politicians who

invoke such principles as self-reliance, a strong military, America's divine appointment as protector of the free world, the protection of individual freedoms and democratic institutions, the intrinsic goodness of America, and the wickedness of the enemy. (p. 63)

Blais specifies a number of factors that meld with LDS beliefs to assist the development of "warlike attitudes" among Mormons (p. 63): (1) allegiance to authority, (2) patriotism and the belief in the intrinsic goodness of the United States, (3) the concept of good versus evil, (4) the strong tradition of American anti-intellectualism, and (5) the idea of racial hierarchy.

Blais (1984) asserted that a primary element of the LDS pro-war mindset is allegiance to authority. According to Blais, most Mormons regard authority as divinely approved, which fosters

uncritical submission, stressing obedience as “the first law of heaven” (p. 63). As a result, neither dissent nor discussion about conflict or the socio-political components involved is encouraged (Blais). As Mormons believe that obedient servants will not be held accountable, their attitude towards war borders on complicity. Accordingly, LDS members receive assurances that they will not be held accountable for their leaders’ mistakes, absolving them from critical examination of their role in a broader societal setting (Blais). Blais also specified that deep-rooted beliefs of patriotism and the intrinsic goodness of America “pervades LDS thinking” (p. 64). According to Blais, the common belief among Mormons is that foreign policy actions committed by America are carried out with the intent of goodness. As a result, a seemingly irrational sense of patriotism surrounds LDS perceptions of war, instilling a deep respect for the country’s leaders. Closely related to belief in America’s perceived goodness and jingoistic patriotism is the view that conflict between the United States and its enemies is a struggle between good versus evil (Blais). According to Blais, Mormons tend to view conflict through dichotomous lenses, restricting objective assessments of foreign policy matters.

Sentiments of anti-intellectualism are also compounded by Mormon tradition (Blais, 1984). For example, Blais explained that the American Revolution has been interpreted as a grass roots movement rather than the work of intellectuals, resulting in the current democratic ideal of equality. Further, a strong emphasis on self-reliance, ingenuity, and free enterprise negates the concept of success through education (Blais). Thus, Blais noted that Latter-day Saints have “become imbued with the Protestant idea that wealth and prosperity somehow mirror spirituality,” a relationship that emphasizes worldly success (p. 71). This sentiment is reflected by the perceived prestige of the Marriotts, a prominent Utah LDS family, and the amount of attention given to the MBA program at BYU, and the business background of many church leaders.

These factors contribute to the “self-containedness of the LDS world view discourages interest in things outside the purview of Mormonism, thus stimulating provincialism and chauvinism among members” (Blais, 1984, p. 67). Blais asserted that LDS members fear disapproval by other members and church leaders if they seek sources of knowledge not approved by church teachings. As a result, self-imposed censorship of sources of information related to world affairs develops, restricting broader participation. Blais also claims that the idea of racial hierarchy is an ingrained Mormon belief, which

ultimately provides justification for military action and “conquest and domination” of other cultures (p. 71). Blais concluded that LDS Church members have become increasingly aligned with “jingoistic and self-serving conservative policies” (p. 71). Blais claimed that, faced with the threat of possible cultural and social ostracism for staying informed, “most Latter-day Saints prefer giving their unquestioning assent to authority, spiritual and temporal, despite its damage to the democratic spirit which demands an informed citizenry” (pp. 71-72). These fundamental beliefs may play a significant role in current LDS support of the war in Iraq, which remains consistently higher than average approval for authority, and the unfavorable perception of anti-war protest.

Tracey Smith (1995) argued that the Vietnam era was a period of repression on Utah’s university campuses rather than a time of unrest and civic engagement. According to Smith, anti-war activity at Brigham Young University, the LDS owned college, remained small and “underground” (p. 98), as “psychological tests, to expel students, revealed the tactics used to rid the school of undesirable pupils, namely those who would not add to BYU’s patriotic image” (p. 98). In other words, BYU conducted inquiries in attempting to discover students who might participate in protest activities. On the University of Utah campus, in Salt Lake City, anti-war activity during the same period was “watered down” (Smith, p. 99). Accordingly, the anti-war movement on the Utah State University campus, 80 miles north of Salt Lake City, during the Vietnam era was most affected by the overall atmosphere of the school: The conservative semi-rural community in Cache Valley and the Utah State student body failed to create a political climate conducive to protest of the war.

Utah, Mormons, War, and Anti-war Protest: Now

Judging from the history of LDS commitment to pro-war sensibilities, it is not surprising then that the majority of Mormons support the Iraq War effort and the political elites who are conducting the conflict, even though the church has taken no official stance on the issue. In 2003, former church president Gordon B. Hinckley emphasized that “as citizens we are all under the direction of our respective national leaders” (§ 22). Hinckley continued: “They have access to greater political and military intelligence than do the people generally” (§ 22). According to Hinckley, “we must all be mindful of another overriding responsibility, which I may add, governs my personal feelings and dictates my personal loyal” (§ 25), and

“that there are times and circumstances when nations are justified, in fact have an obligation, to fight for family, for liberty, and against tyranny, threat, and oppression” (§ 30).

For LDS members, the president of the church and his advisors hold the most authority. James Faust (1996), a counselor in the church’s presidency, have referred to LDS leaders as “The Brethren, those who hold the keys of the kingdom of God on earth” (§ 4). According to Faust, there are five fundamental prophetic truths in the Church’s authority structure. First, “the keys of authority of God have been given by Him to Joseph Smith and each of his successors who have been called as Presidents of the Church” (§ 26). Second, “those keys and authority are never given to another people, and those who have such authority are ‘known to the church’” (§ 27). Third, “continuing revelation and leadership for the church come through the President of the Church, and *he will never mislead the Saints*” (§ 28). Fourth, “individual members of the Church may receive revelation for their own callings,” but “they may not receive spiritual instruction for those in higher authority” (§ 29). Finally, “those who claim direct revelation from God for the Church outside the established order and channel of the priesthood are misguided. This applies to any who follow them” (§ 30). As such, adhering to doctrine set forth by LDS leaders requires devotion and dedication to the presidency of the church, and although church leaders claim no official stance on the Iraq War, “It may even be that He [God] will hold us responsible if we try to impede or hedge up the way of those who are involved in a contest with forces of evil and oppression” (Hinckley, 2003, § 32). In other words, the war in Iraq is a conflict between good and evil, and support by members is expected.

Utahns’ support of President Bush and his policy in Iraq has consistently been around or above 50%, with the most current estimate at 55% (Gehrke, 2008). In February of 2003, Elaine Jarvik (2003) reported that 73% of Utahns backed an invasion of Iraq, 10 percentage points higher than the nation as a whole. According to Alan Edwards (2003), in March that same year, Bush enjoyed “overwhelming support, with Utah approval ratings higher in every category than the national numbers” of 63% (§ 2). Gehrke (2008) reports that Bush currently enjoys a 55% approval rating in Utah. According to Egan (2006), LDS membership seems to be motivated by Bush’s general conservative principles rather than specific issues or trends: “They tend to be impressed by Mr. Bush’s faith and are convinced that he understands their lives and values. They like what they see as his muscular foreign policy” (§ 5). In a 2006 interview with the *Salt Lake Tribune*, Utah State University political scientist Michael Lyons pointed out

that Mormons like President Bush because of his openness in declaring his religious devotion. Lyons also noted that “it may be his self-confidence and open assertion of the values he believes in” (cited in LaPlante, 2006a, ¶ 48). According to LDS Church spokesperson Dale Bills, “Latter-day Saints are taught to support their local and national governments, but the church does not endorse candidates, parties, or platforms” (cited in LaPlante, ¶18). In 2002, while speaking to LDS Church members, Russel M. Nelson, a member of the church’s Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, stated: “We believe that governments were instituted of God for the benefit of man; and that he holds men accountable for their acts in relation to them, both in making laws and administering them, for the good and safety of society” (¶ 3). The bond between religion and politics is reflected at both the state leadership and local levels. For example, at a 2006 church meeting, an male LDS member charged: “If you’re a Democrat, I want you to understand that I support my president. And if you have a problem with that, we can talk behind the church” (cited in LaPlante, ¶ 11). According to LaPlante, the comment drew laughs, but no challengers. In short, politics and conservative Mormon ideals are consistently joined.

According to LaPlante (2006a), 73% of individuals identifying themselves as Mormons in a poll by the *Salt Lake Tribune* say they support Bush’s conduct of the war. Freeman notes that in specific LDS scripture, Mormons are instructed to “submit to kings presidents, rulers, and magistrates in obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law” (cited in LaPlante, ¶ 19). According to Matt Canham (2007), Utah Mormons make up 60.65% of Utah’s population, a number that has decreased in recent years, but one that still emphasizes LDS influence in the state. The relationship between state and religion in Utah is significant when considering religious and political ideologies, pre-existing opinion, attitudes, and knowledge regarding the Iraq War. Rod Decker (2005) has argued that Utah’s major influence in politics is the Latter-day Saint (LDS) religion. As a result, Matt Canham has suggested that Mormons tend to vote at higher rates than non-Mormons in Utah, and as such, Mormons make up 90% of the State Legislature and hold most local and state offices, including governor and all of the members of the Utah Supreme Court. Indeed, Dave Egan (2001) has described Utah as a theocracy. Accordingly, Mormon ideals of morality, family, work, and prudence underlie most public discourse: “The church neither exercises nor seeks control over government, yet it remains, not only the most powerful single interest in Utah politics, but probably the most powerful single interest of any American state” (Decker, p. 98). Tad Walch (2007) has

reported that the church consistently reiterates a policy of neutrality, prohibiting church leaders from endorsing candidates in the name of the church and the use of church buildings for political purposes. According to Walch, the church “also avoids telling church members for whom they should vote” (§19). However, as Drake Bennett (2006) has reported, Joseph Quin Monson, a political scientist at LDS-owned Brigham Young University, stresses that Mormons are reliable Republicans. Indeed, the last time the state’s electoral votes went to a Democrat was in 1964, when the majority of citizens voted for Lyndon Johnson over Barry Goldwater (Bernick, 2007). Monson specified that Mormons tend to be culturally and economically conservative on most major issues, with 80 to 90% of Mormons voting for a Republican candidate. According to Tom Baldwin (2006), 72% of Utah voters, which reflects the percentage of LDS members in the state, chose to re-elect President Bush in 2004.

This political/religious relationship was a focus in the 2008 GOP presidential primary race, with former presidential candidate and LDS Church member Mitt Romney raising \$6 million and winning 90% of the vote in state GOP presidential primary on February 5 (Roche, 2008). Additionally, based on President Bush’s May 28, 2008 visit to Utah, the alliance appears to be strong. The focus of President Bush’s most recent trip to Utah was to raise funds for John McCain’s presidential campaign, but it also included in President Bush’s visit was a meeting with the LDS Church President Thomas S. Monson. In a statement in *The Salt Lake Tribune*, White House spokeswoman Dana Perino disclosed:

He meets with [the First Presidency] regularly and thinks they have a good role to play in America, in terms of helping communities and spreading the word of love. I don’t think the President would ever pass up an opportunity to meet with the president of the Mormon church.
(cited in Gehrke, 2008, ¶ 20)

Robert Gehrke of the *Salt Lake Tribune* emphasized that, according to Republican activist and historian Ron Fox, the May 28 visit to Utah was President Bush’s fourth, more than any other president in history. It is reasonable to conclude that President Bush might appreciate the approving audience in Utah.

The religiously and politically conservative climate in Utah may help to explain the lack of protest against Bush’s war policies by Utahns. In the context of overwhelming support for war in Utah, protest demonstrations, strikes, or marches may be discounted or dismissed as unpatriotic or as representing liberal ideas that are in opposition to conservative values. That said, Utah is not without anti-war activism. Rocky

Anderson, former mayor of Salt Lake City, publicly and unapologetically spoke out in protest of the Iraq War and George Bush's leadership during the president's August 30, 2006 visit to the city. Anderson's actions were the focus of some controversy, bringing Utah into national headlines. According to reports, between 1,500 and 4,000 protestors "cheered" for Anderson as he labeled President Bush a "dishonest, war-mongering, human rights violating president" (May, 2006, ¶ 1). In the same speech, the mayor also ranked George W. Bush's presidency as the worst in history. Anderson even invited Cindy Sheehan, a strong voice of dissent against the war in which her son was killed. In what May labeled an "eruption of free speech" (¶ 10), protestors marched to the federal building in Salt Lake to deliver a petition for the war's end. During the activities, protest songs from the Vietnam era were revived, but demonstrators did not fit the stereotype of the 1960s. Almost all of those participating in Salt Lake's protest on August 30 were described as "clean-cut" and included activists of all ages who peacefully gathered for a statement of unified dissent (Swinyard & Lofton, 2006, ¶ 6).

Anderson's guidance of the Salt Lake City protest did not go without criticism from the Utah Republican Party or Utah citizens. The Republican Party aired radio ads asking people to call Mayor Anderson and inform him that his actions were "embarrassing Utah" (Swinyard, Bernick, & Dougherty, 2006, ¶ 2). The radio ad tells listeners that Sheehan's beliefs are anti-American and that her "cut-and-run strategy" is an effort to convince America that it should retreat (Swinyard et al., ¶ 8). According to Swinyard et al., Anderson's office fielded hundreds of phone calls from people who responded to the ad campaign. Although Anderson's activism was supported by thousands, Utahns see protest as "aiding the enemies of the United States" (May, 2006, ¶ 3). At the time, poll statistics report that 45% of Utah respondents view war protestors as aiding U.S. enemies, while just 27% see protestors as playing an important role in national debate (May).

Most recently, Anderson joined in an anti-war protest celebrating President Bush's May 28, 2008 visit, during which he attempted to raise campaign funds for John McCain. At the protest Anderson joined Daniel Ellsberg, Iraq War Veteran and Utah native Marshall Thompson, and Kathy Snyder, mother of a serviceman killed in Iraq, in speaking to over 500 citizens at Washington Square in Salt Lake City. In addition, Moveon.org organized a quiz challenge comparing statements made by President Bush and John McCain. According to Anderson, who now runs the Salt Lake City-based nonprofit High Road for Human

Rights Advocacy Project, the event was a gathering of active residents “saying ‘no more’ to disastrous war, deceit, domestic spying, unconscionable and illegal kidnapping and torture, flagrant violations of the Constitution and crimes against humanity” (cited in Jensen, 2008, ¶ 6).

Cases of individual activism in Utah, specifically Cache Valley, have sparked some awareness of an underlying atmosphere of dissent in Utah. The most powerful example is the story of the previously mentioned Iraq War veteran Marshall Thompson, a Utah State University alumnus, and son of a former Logan City mayor. The Army reservist walked 500 miles across the state in an effort to raise awareness and convince citizens that it is time to bring home troops (Speckman, 2006). Thompson maintains the opinion that the people can initiate a response from the government through voicing concern and participating in active dialogue with leaders (Speckman). The veteran notes that Utah has one of the lowest per capita rates of troop deaths in the country, the lowest military enlistment statistics in the nation, and the highest approval rating for the war in Iraq. Anita Dancs, research director at the National Priorities Project, speculates that the comparatively low number of Utahns at war is in part due to the fact that young Latter-day Saints typically embark on a two-year church mission at the age other 19-year olds are considering military service (cited in LaPlante, 2006b). Dancs notes that when missionaries return home, the “may have other priorities” (cited in LaPlante, ¶ 9) and “may have thought a little more about what they want to do with their lives” (cited in LaPlante, ¶ 10).

According to LaPlante (2006b), Thompson disagrees with those who contend that Americans cannot support their troops without supporting the war. Thompson now draws from his experience as an Army journalist in Iraq, in an attempt to persuade people that the war in Iraq is wrong, and troops should be withdrawn. His journey was chronicled in a documentary entitled *A Soldier's Peace*, and has been presented at a number of film festivals across the United States (LaPlante, 2008a). However, LaPlante (2006a) reported that in the Utah anti-war activist community, Mormons who oppose the war are a minority. For example, Bonnie Tyler, an LDS member of the Peace and Justice organization, which organizes weekly Iraq War protests, says that her husband has stopped going to church due to her activist involvement (LaPlante). According to LaPlante, Tyler's husband stopped attending church after other Mormons told him he was acting against church doctrine by opposing the war.

As discussed, there is still above average support among Utahns for Bush and his policy in Iraq, with a “healthy majority of Utah Republicans – 65% – still give Bush high ratings” (LaPlante, 2007, ¶ 3). Even with a recent decrease of support for the Iraq War, 55% of Utah still believes George W. Bush is performing well as president (Gehrke, 2008). Interestingly, the connection between religion and politics seemed to have played a significant role in the large percentage drop last year. LaPlante reported that while speaking to BYU students, now deceased LDS Church President Gordon B Hinckley lamented “the terrible cost of war” (LaPlante, ¶ 12). Hinckley continued: “What a fruitless thing it so often is. And what a terrible price it exacts” (cited in LaPlante, ¶ 13). Kirk Jowers, director of the University of Utah’s Hinckley Institute of Politics, commented that although Hinckley did not specifically mention Bush or Iraq in his speech, days following his address consisted of online discussions among Mormons about the church’s leader’s words: “He may or may not have intended anything by it, and he certainly did not mention Iraq in that speech, but the speech certainly may have been interpreted by the LDS community as an indictment against the world’s violence” (cited in LaPlante, ¶ 16). According to Jowers: “Small phrases by President Hinckley are to the LDS community as Alan Greenspan’s words were to the financial community” (cited in LaPlante, ¶ 16).

Attempting to grasp the political, cultural, and religious backgrounds of my study’s location is important in examining the role of individuals’ cultural subjectivities in interpreting anti-war messages. Within this context of conservative Utah culture and limited anti-war activism, the goal of my research seeks to examine how an alternative form of anti-war protest is interpreted by college students on a traditionally complicit campus. Underlying this goal is an attempt to gauge the role theatre might serve as a means of dissent in a conservative climate, while trying to understand how viewers’ distinct subjectivities assist them in interpreting artistic protest.

Mormons as an Audience

Reader reception research has articulated three distinct responses to media texts (Hall, 1980; Morley, 1980). Dominant responses (reading as intended), negotiated responses (decoding the hegemonic position), and oppositional responses (placing the text into an alternative frame of reference) have been categories used to explain individuals’ different interpretations of the same piece of text (Hall; Morley).

Hall argues that viewers could decode texts from one of three locations: (1) the preferred position, (2) the negotiated position, or (3) an oppositional position. This model of examining readings by the viewer established the importance of the audience member in the process of making meaning within the context of encoding and decoding a mediated text.

Most audiences, according to Hall (1980), apply negotiated readings, which privilege a dominant reading, but also offer viewers a space to apply other individual factors to negotiate a message. The audience interpretation framework introduced by Hall was extended by Morley (1980), who proposed that the encoding/decoding model was too inclusive. Morley illuminated two important elements of audience interpretation. First, Morley contends that there was more than just a single formulation of preferred, negotiated, and oppositional reading of a text. Second, the audience members' reading of a text is not only a function of social class, but established by a variety of social forces. Accordingly, the interpretation of a text does not rest solely in demographic variables such as race, gender, class, etc.: "Rather, it is identification with a cultural subgroup that is important because social positions structure and restrict access to various codes and discourses" (Lind, 1996, p. 54). Diawara (1990) and Cohen (1991) have argued that these approaches to spectatorship and identification research cannot fully explain the relationship between the viewer and the text. Rather, explicating "relevant moments of meaning" (Cohen, p. 443) occurring at the intersection of spectators' cultural subjectivities and mediated texts is critical to identifying and understanding the interpretive process used by viewers.

The importance of viewer identification with cultural subgroups can be applied to discovering how religious individuals construct interpretations within the context of individual religiosity, dominant religious culture, and his/her lived experiences. Mormon Church leaders consistently detail standards LDS members should adhere to when consuming media, informing members how to maintain their religiosity in a world of mass communication (Stout, Scott, & Martin, 1996). As such, it is likely that audience members experience conflict in choosing television programs and films, while balancing religious commitments with daily use of mass media (Stout, 1996). According to Daniel Stout (1996), Mormon leaders embrace a powerful effects model of mass communication, reflected by how the church uses media for religious purposes as well as its public warnings about media's effects on the family. The family is the most important element of doctrine in Mormon theology, which teaches that the family is eternal and will live

together in the hereafter only through obedience to God's laws (Stout). These strong commitments to family life are at the center of church beliefs and are the focal components of church leaders' praise and criticism of mass media (Stout). Criticism of media by leaders, asserts Stout, represents a religious effort to protect the family from what is considered to be detrimental to moral values in the home.

Pessimistic views of media by LDS church leaders provide three primary strategies in setting standards for Mormon consumption of mass media (Stout, 1996). First, various types of media have been discouraged by leaders in church talks, lectures, and articles. Since the introduction of the film industry's rating system in the 1970s, the focus of media criticism by church officials has been R-rated movies, movies that have "become synonymous with 'unclean' media in the official discourse about media" (Stout, p. 90). Stout affirms that the frequency with which church leaders condemn R-rated films has established the rating as "a common standard for judging media among Mormons" (p. 90). Second, although Mormon officials have persistently warned members about the effects of mass media, the topic has become a dominant theme in recent conferences, lessons, and church publications (Stout). According to Stout, since 1970, members of the LDS faith have been advised about the effects of rock music, appropriate use of television, and specific criteria for selecting films. The third strategy of media awareness utilized by Latter-day Saints comes in the form of specific church guidelines and recommendations for appropriate use of media, "a rules-based approach focusing almost exclusively on the avoidance of media depictions considered inconsistent with church teachings" (Stout, p. 88). As a result of a strict guidelines approach, church recommendations about media use have been more rigidly connected to religious standards and practices than to the intellectual and aesthetic merit of the text (Stout).

Exploring how a community of Mormons employed secularization strategies to participate in the media environment, Stout (2004) studied the processes Mormons implement to maintain religious commitment within the environment of what many consider the nation's "sin city," Las Vegas. In his research, Stout examined how media-related conflicts were identified and resolved by Mormons in a complex mediated environment, and how this specific religious audience negotiated boundaries between the religious and the secular within a diverse city culture. According to Stout, his study "examines how Mormons themselves talk about secular Las Vegas media as they consciously strive to preserve particular values and remain devout" (p. 62). Specifically, Stout asks how Mormons collectively create codes of

understanding that enable them to “navigate” (p. 66) the Las Vegas media environment without sacrificing religiosity. According to Stout, analysis suggests that strategies by audience members are not restricted to media resistance alone, and that members of religious groups can “form around secular media use as a means of religious empowerment” (p. 72). In other words, Stout argued that LDS members are able to individually negotiate media messages and religiosity, using media to strengthen their devotion to church principles. For instance, a number of LDS members questioned by Stout interpreted Las Vegas as a location to strengthen devotion to church doctrines. In other words, rather than avoid the perceived negative Las Vegas influences, some respondents used exposure to questionable messages to test their beliefs and bolster their religiosity.

Stout (2004) used broad classification of viewers, in which the Las Vegas Mormon audience is defined as an interpretive community, “or a sublevel group capable of interpretive strategies not necessarily employed by Mormons in other areas” (p. 64-65). In contrast to members of the church in Las Vegas, LDS members make up over 90 percent of the population in Cache Valley (Stolz, 2007). Northern Utah Latter-Day Saints maintain a more literal, restricted sense of community, in which interpretive strategies are not commonly used to make sense of local culture. The high percentage of Mormons in the area, the proximity to church headquarters in Salt Lake City, and a rural setting provide a more homogenous set of standards and practices involved in defining local culture and participation with media (Stout). Stout argues that an individual’s media environment forms the basis for much of what is talked about in normal conversations of daily life. As such, members of an interpretive community share codes of understanding of media texts as they engage in common discourse about media and utilize similar strategies of interpretation (Stout).

Using transcriptions of tape recordings of focus groups consisting of 212 Brigham Young University (BYU) students, Stout (2004) analyzed statements and categorized them into sections of five dominant themes of “secularization defense strategies” (p. 67). The first strategy utilized by church members was psychological geographic separation, in which participants separated themselves from the media environment psychologically: “They frequently describe two cities of Las Vegas, the Strip and where they live” (Stout, p. 67). The purpose of drawing this boundary, according to Stout, is a method to achieve a mental separation because a physical one is nearly impossible. A second strategy indicated by respondents was viewing the “Las Vegas experience” as a faith-enhancing practice rather than faith-

degrading (Stout, p. 69). According to Stout, respondents viewed controversial material as an opportunity to strengthen religious convictions and make decisions according to religious values.

Consistent with this strategy was the theme of Las Vegas Mormons as members of a special group with a unique identity (Stout, 2004). When describing Las Vegas Mormons, study participants used terms such as “more intelligent,” “focused,” “stronger,” and “less judgmental,” indicating a sense of elitism and pride (Stout, p. 70). This strategy, asserts Stout, justifies the Mormon presence in Southern Nevada. A strong theme of resistance also included what Stout labels as the “family media umbrella” (p. 70), under which Mormon participants viewed Las Vegas as family entertainment. Stout interpreted this strategy as the ability to screen out unwanted aspects of the media environment to accomplish familial goals within the context of religiosity. A final strategy identified by Stout involved “mythical standards of acceptable behavior and non-acceptable behavior” (p. 71). Within this context, LDS members’ perceptions of what acceptable Las Vegas behaviors are, according to Mormon Church policies, varied greatly among respondents (Stout). Stout found that commitment to strict LDS guidelines was reduced as personally molded standards of acceptability of the media environment were adopted. Thus, Stout suggests that Mormons consciously categorized desirable and unfavorable media within the context of their own experiences, preserving religious values while existing within the secular environment. From his findings, Stout asserts: “Strategies by audience members are not confined to media resistance alone and that interpretive communities can form around secular media use as a means of religious empowerment” (p. 72).

In an earlier study, Stout et al. (1996) found considerable distinctions in the ways two Mormon sample groups, both of which maintained strong religious commitments, talked about media selection decisions. The researchers’ goal to discover how Mormons define and resolve conflicts of media use and religious commitments involved two distinct studies. The first study included analysis of how students from Brigham Young University (BYU) spoke about films. The second sample analyzed Mormon women’s views on television in three major cities in the Western U.S. (Los Angeles, Houston, and Salt Lake City). Implementing open-ended written statements and survey data, Stout, et al. identified dominant themes in participants’ responses, exploring the variation in styles of talking about the media and how two

samples of Mormons define and resolve conflicts associated with particular television programs and movies.

Stout et al. (1996) noted a marked polarization of audiences within each sample, in which the two audiences from each study were divided in how they described media-related experiences. Each study found a highly selective, conservative audience, as well as one that was more independent in choosing television programs and movies (Stout et al.). In each sample, the “Traditionals” placed a strong emphasis on institutional influence in choosing texts according to what is immoral, while the “Independents” described their media-related experiences in individual terms and assessed value of texts from a more personal point of view. The researchers focused on results from the BYU sample in comparing the role religious values play in film selection by different groups. According to Stout et al., the traditionals in the BYU sample described the role of movie viewing within the context of three themes: (1) ratings, in which students mentioned the rating system in evaluating the quality of films, (2) negative effects, or the belief that movies may have corrosive effects on a person’s religious faith, and (3) censorship, in which students expressed the need for more editing of controversial films so they can be viewed by religious audiences. For example, the “R” rating of *Schindler’s List* was a deciding factor for many traditionals’ decision not to see the film. In citing negative effects, traditionals explained that church authorities had counseled them to avoid watching immoral films. Finally, in reference to the need for more editing of films, BYU traditionals noted that they would watch *Schindler’s List* if certain scenes were edited.

Independents from the BYU sample maintained starkly different criteria than that of traditionals in film selection (Stout et al., 1996). According to Stout, et al., independents generally described movie selection in more personal, intimate language, and were more tolerant of popular culture in general. Responses by BYU independents revealed three dominant themes in relation to film selection. First, independents were less likely to judge a film based on ratings alone, choosing to examine content and merit. Second, Independents signified a stronger reliance on the opinions of peers for information on which movies were worth seeing. Third, independents maintained a more reflective approach, in which these viewers evaluated films according to personal, private interests rather than relying on institutional guidelines, contradicting church leaders’ warnings of negative effects caused by certain films. Within the context of their research, Stout et al. found “striking differences” (p. 256) in the ways traditionals and

independents talked about media, which is compelling given that both audiences maintained strong religious commitments. From this research, it was apparent that respondents drew from multiple elements of religiosity in making decisions about the media, which raises more questions regarding what those distinguishing factors are between independents and traditionals. Accordingly, both personal religiosity and institutional guidelines may have been salient in students' decision making about media use.

David Scott's (2003) study of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons/LDS) and their responses to television revealed strategies adopted by Latter-day Saints to resolve tension resulting from television content that is not consistent with the values established by church leaders. According to Scott, Mormons are "unique" (p. 318) to study because of the immediacy between members and revelations from God, in which church leaders act as the "mouthpiece" (p. 318) of God when speaking in general conference meetings or when they endorse publication of articles or lessons. Scott argued that "the growing LDS emphasis on the harms of media and the importance of maintaining traditional family values" highlights the idea that some members may use conflicting narratives in the relationship between their religion and the media, and that these interpretations play a role in their media use (p. 321). Scott focused on how members of the LDS church either enjoy or shun programming that is in conflict with religious doctrine. Specifically, Scott examined, "how a group of LDS construct their media experience within the broader rubric of the institutional rhetoric that emphasized the threat of television to their religious and traditional family values" (p. 321).

In his findings, Scott (2003) noted that audience members who are potentially offended by media content may at times offer resistant or negotiated readings of the mediated texts. Scott asserts that the "encoding/decoding" model reveals how religious texts and media texts are negotiated by participants attempting to balance the practice of faith with participation as audience members (p. 329). According to Scott, his findings question the perception that religious audiences in a conservative setting will apply similar conservative practices in their decoding of television texts and viewing practices. Rather, individuals place emphasis on their independent ability to filter out potential negative components of television and "resist what they read as cultural rather than official discourse of church leaders" (p. 329).

According to John Fiske (1988), social allegiances and practices are established through shared discourse, which is "the means by which the allegiances are brought to bear on any moment of viewing" (p.

247). Fiske asserted that meaning is produced when the discourses of the viewer intersect with those of the program in a moment of “semiosis” (p. 247). As Fiske explains, “in this process, the meanings and pleasures that are eventually produced are determined by the social allegiances of the person engaged in it, not by any preferential or possessive activity of the text itself” (p. 248). The concept of relevance, or the “text-as-menu” (Fiske, p. 248), focuses on an active viewer: “The viewer makes meanings and pleasures from television that are relevant to his or her social allegiances at the moment of viewing; the criteria for relevance precede the viewing moment” (p. 247). In other words, it is crucial to understand that the generation and circulation of meanings and pleasures in individuals’ contemporary social formations generally influence how individuals come to understand and read media narratives.

How individuals frame narratives and judge characters and events relate to how they either distance themselves from a media text or critically explore reaction that may be outside pre-existing ideologies (Cohen, 1991; also see Cooper, 1998, 1999; Lind, 1996). According to Cohen and Ribak (2003), a text that includes elements that are relevant to a viewer’s life is more likely to “engage the viewer, advance the narrative illusion and promote willing suspension of disbelief” (p. 120), whereas a text that does not connect to a viewer’s emotions and experiences prevents the viewer to “lose” (p. 120) him or herself in the plot. Realism is in direct relationship with the proximity of a viewer to a piece of text (Cohen & Ribak). Realism, asserted Cohen and Ribak, is the extent to which a text resonates with a specific viewer, and is relevant to a particular aspect of that viewer’s self-identity. In essence, the realism of a text depends upon viewers’ life experiences, ideological resources, and cultural subjectivities that experiences and resources create (Cohen & Ribak). These subjectivities, asserted Cohen and Ribak, create moments of meaning. According to Cohen and Ribak:

If the text touches on or relates to issues that the viewer deals with in his or her own life, then the viewer will find the text relevant and is likely to become more engaged in the viewing process. In that case, realism or relevance, leads to pleasure. But if the text is deemed irrelevant, it will be perceived as unrealistic and less pleasurable. (p. 122)

My research seeks to provide new insight into how spectators negotiate a war protest play into their individual political, religious, and cultural subjectivities that are generally in conflict with the anti-war narratives. The dominantly religious and culturally conservative audience in Northern Utah provides a

unique opportunity to explore how theatre might function as anti-war protest. Implementing the theoretical concept of framing, research interrogating how students at a university in which LDS students are the majority interpret *Embedded's* anti-war message contributes insight into how alternative protest narratives are negotiated, rejected, or received by a group with strong pro-war sentiment and commitment to authority. Research suggests that the LDS community maintains consistent support for President Bush and the Iraq War, support that is not shared by the majority of the American public. As such, my research attempts to examine how students' collective subjectivities, political allegiances, and religious commitments assist them in comprehending *Embedded's* strong anti-war message. In other words, I also seek to discover how viewers of a conservative group legitimate or delegitimize anti-war activism.

By analyzing how anti-war protest, specifically anti-war theatre, is framed in the press and by the individual, my research works to expand the definition of protest and more fully comprehend the societal boundaries of anti-war activism set by the public. Ultimately, I argue that research of theatrical productions within the contexts of communication and protest may encourage discussion of anti-war activism, and work to advance critical and alternative voices of dissent that have been historically celebrated in the American democratic experiment. Examination of public and private discourse of *Embedded* is an initial step in this process.

CHAPTER II

CRITICAL METHOD OF ANALYSIS

Through examining critics' responses to *Embedded* and students' interpretations of the play, my research attempts to understand how anti-war theatre is interpreted on both public and personal levels. To accomplish this goal, my study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What framing strategies structure the discourse of theatre critics' reviews of *Embedded* and its anti-war themes?
2. How do college students in a predominantly conservative LDS population frame their interpretations *Embedded* and its anti-war themes?

My study involves two stages. First, I conducted a close textual analysis of the discourse underlying theatre critics' reviews of *Embedded* and its criticism of the Iraq War and explicated the dominant framing strategies in reviews of the play. The second stage of my study involves analysis of college students' essays written in response to their viewing of *Embedded*. The combination of textual analysis of the frames underlying the critics' reviews of *Embedded* and analysis of student essays represents a two-stage methodological approach implemented to understand responses to *Embedded* at a both mass and an individual level. How critics and viewers interpret an anti-war narrative such as *Embedded* may indicate dominant attitudes within the context of U.S. political policy and the war in Iraq, and how those attitudes develop in relation to allegiances to powerful cultural and political institutions. More importantly, viewer interpretations, combined with analysis of reviews of the play, could provide insight to how dominant beliefs might be challenged or reinforced.

Analysis of Reviews: Description of Process

The first section of my research centers on critics' framing of *Embedded*. As both a live action play and a DVD release, the analysis of the reviews is grounded in research that examined film reviews. Using Lexis/Nexis, ProQuest News, and Academic Search Premiere, I searched for all reviews of *Embedded* spanning one month prior to the stage debut of the play, October 23, 2003, to one month after the release of the DVD version *Embedded Live!*, November 24, 2004. My search resulted in 27 reviews of *Embedded* within this time frame (Appendix A). Reviews were present in 17 different newspapers and

magazines across nine states. Press reviews appeared in major national daily newspapers such as the *New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal*, and large circulation daily regional and state newspapers, such as the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Boston Globe*, *Phoenix New Times*, and *Chicago Daily Herald*. *Embedded* was also reviewed in smaller, local circulation dailies, such as the *Santa Fe New Mexican*, and the *Hartford Courant*. National magazines such as *The New Yorker* and the *Columbia Journalism Review* carried reviews, as well as the entertainment magazines *Variety* and *Backstage*.

According to Alice Hall (2001), reviews function to both assist the audience to decide whether to see a film, and to provide contextual information that may shape how viewers interpret and respond to the films they see. Hall emphasizes that audiences generally do not consume entertainment media without exposure to advertisements, news accounts, and reviews. Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery (1985) noted that film reviews serve two primary functions; maintaining an agenda-setting function, informing audiences of what to think about, and critiquing established normative limits of cinema at a specific time in history. As such, these limits “are exposed when critics are confronted with a film that is ‘different’ and that doesn’t fit neatly into the customary frames of reference of standard critical discourse” (p. 90). In these cases, a film may break accepted artistic standards to the extent that critics may struggle to locate the work within a familiar category (Allen & Gomery).

Judith Williamson (1992) insisted that the majority of critics in mainstream media adhere to a common idea of how to measure artistic worth. Significantly, Williamson emphasizes the importance of how film criticism is “linked with distributors, exhibitors, and publications,” which are influential in how reviewers accomplish their objectives. As such, critics consistently exclude more experimental or unconventional attempts of film as serious contributions to the cinema industry. According to Williamson, reviewers limit broad cinematic experimentation and expression while narrowing viewers’ interpretations of artistic worth. In addition, Williamson argues that although reviewing films might seem to be about the film itself, the process “is also about ideologies, taken-for-granted attitudes towards our society and its cultural forms” (p. 14). Ultimately, Williamson considers reviewing cinematic texts as producing “ideology we have habituated ourselves to in the so-called Western democracies” (p. 19).

Embedded is an example of a work that may not “fit neatly into the customary frames of reference” (Allen & Gomery, 1985, p. 90). Indeed, Wyatt and Badger (1987) agreed: “Consumers of elite

art forms – painting, classical music, serious fiction and the like – are perhaps more appreciative of the evaluative and analytical functions of reviews, a fertile topic for research” (p. 28). As *Embedded* is a combination of film and theatre, examination of the play’s reviews situates itself at the intersection of ideological spheres. I argue that Robbins’ work avoids traditional classification within the theatre and cinema genres, and thus was difficult for critics to categorize, as Allen and Gomery suggested. The play uses multimedia as an element in the production, and is captured in cinematic form on DVD.

Based on research of protest and anti-war activity, numerous framing practices and devices implemented to marginalize dissent have been studied.² According to Todd Gitlin (1977), media play a defining role in specifying which groups, voices and perspectives are legitimate, and which are not. Douglas McLeod and Benjamin Detenber (1999) argued: “Guard dog media coverage highlights the deviance of the protestors, diminishing their contributions and effectiveness, insulating the power structure, and defusing the threat” (p. 5). This section of my analysis seeks to add insight into how critics work to frame a satirical anti-war play, released in 2003, on the heels of the invasion of Iraq. Because *Embedded* is intended to be a confrontational protest or, according to Robbins “theater that is meant to disturb” (cited in Daniel, ¶ 9), my study of reviews is situated within previous research interrogating film reviews and framing (Allen & Gomery, 1985; Williamson, 1992) and how media framed Iraq War protests (e.g., Bishop, 2006; Dardis, 2006; Ryan, 2005).

Dardis (2006) examined media coverage of Iraq War protests and developed a general typology, in which 14 marginalization devices were explicated. Specifying “war protest marginalization devices” (p. 119), Dardis’ typological list of framing devices used by media to depict protest includes:

- general lawlessness
- confrontation with police
- freak show
- romper room/idiots at large
- carnival
- actual statistics
- generalizations
- witness accounts

- official sources
- protests as treason
- protests as anarchy
- protest as anti-troop
- inclusion of counter demonstrators
- historical comparisons.

Dardis' research is applicable to an analysis of *Embedded* reviews because he emphasizes that the typology is not restricted to newspaper coverage, and can be used “for more detailed inspection into media framing studies and perhaps could explain more precisely the content that goes into media coverage to create certain orientations or points of views (i.e. frame)” (p. 132). Thus, applying this typology relevant to broader areas of framing research may “provide deeper insight into current knowledge surrounding media coverage and protest groups” that build understanding of media and dissent (p. 131).

Accordingly, Michael Ryan (2004) argues that framing devices implemented by opinion writers rely on practices of the news organization's attitudes, ideologies, and practices. Ryan argues that enhanced support of political and media elites by opinion writers assisted in omission of alternative views and voices of dissent, a problematic practice: “To pretend alternatives do not exist, even when those alternatives are enumerated elsewhere on the opinion page, may not serve readers best, even during times of terrible crisis” (p. 378). Ryan interpreted the relationship between editorial writers and the official narratives embraced by the newspaper organization as a compromise between individual and organizational ideologies.

Williamson (1992) also understands film criticism as relying significantly on organizational, cultural, and political influences while reviewing cinema. As such, reviews may be considered as a combination of opinion based and evaluative journalism, attempting to explain an act of protest. I seek to explicate dominant themes in critics' reviews of *Embedded*, examining which frames were used and how they worked to marginalize or bolster the play's protest narratives.

Response Analysis: Description of Process

In the second section of my analysis, I explore how viewers of *Embedded* interpret depictions of soldiers, politicians, and journalists in the play. After viewing *Embedded*, 76 university students wrote reactions to the play. Student respondents were asked to write essays in which they describe their reactions to *Embedded*. The sample of viewers consisted of students enrolled in journalism, English, and theatre classes. The majority of students (56) were members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon) faith with 15 respondents indicating a religion other than LDS and five indicating no religious affiliation. To clarify, this sample does not represent the viewing public as a whole. However, student responses do provide an opportunity to gather insight into how members of a predominately conservative campus culture interpret theatrical social commentary.

As discussed, theatre during a time of war can serve as a device for representing controversy (Reston, 1991), provide an alternative mode for disseminating information (Colleran, 2003), and seek to humanize history and protest the act of war (Pottenger, 2001). These claims present the foundation of my study. To examine theatre's effectiveness as a protest tool, I organized viewings of the recently produced and mass distributed Iraq War piece *Embedded: Live!* by Robbins and administered an open-ended essay survey to examine audience interpretations of the play/film. Operating from the conceptual framework of framing, I investigated how individual viewers react to, and reflect upon a piece of protest theatre in relationship to their cultural environment and personal beliefs and values. As such, my research offers new insight into individuals' interpretations of a specific piece of war protest theatre, and what type of readings a piece of anti-war theatre may encourage among primarily conservative viewers who overwhelmingly support President Bush and his war policies.

According to Nelson (1987), written self-report essays allow spectators to organize and interpret their own experiences and responses. As such, researchers have minimal influence on responses (Nelson). For example, Cooper (1998, 1999), used self-report essays in two separate studies of how viewers interpreted cinematic texts. Cooper analyzed essay responses to interrogate how Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* resonated with viewers, and later, how audience members interpreted the film *Thelma and Louise*. In order to assure responses to *Embedded* are based solely on viewers' interpretations, like Cooper, I utilize open-ended self-report essays to examine how audience members frame the play within their own cultural

subjectivities. I analyzed viewers' essays explicating statements that indicate religious allegiances and cultural identities used to interpret *Embedded*. These were then organized into individual frames.

Entman (1993) argued that individual frames are inherent pieces of information applied by persons to organize and interpret the world around them. In other words, individuals use already existing ideological allegiances to make sense of what they experience. The degree of a message's salience, asserts Entman, can enhance or diminish "the probability that receivers will perceive the information, discern meaning and thus process it and store it in memory" (p. 54). In other words, relevance of a message is a critical factor in how individuals interpret information, which may or may not align with the communicator's intention (Entman). Accordingly, receivers may rely on cultural and/or social groupings in their discourse with a message. Similarly, according to M. Ryan (2004), personal prejudices, past experiences, religious affiliations, values, and education contribute to constructing frames that assist in creating social reality. Ryan argues that individuals constantly engage in developing individual frames to understand the world, and in essence how to interpret mediated representations of society.

The viewings of *Embedded* took place in a large classroom on the university campus equipped with audio/visual equipment (Old Main 115), which was reserved for Monday, April 16 and Tuesday, April 17, 2007. The dates of the two showings of the play were determined by facility availability and time frame required for the study. The room is also equipped with fold down desks, which provided the venue for respondents to write essays following *Embedded* and eliminated the need for audience re-location.

In order to recruit study participants, small advertising flyers (see Appendix B) were distributed in lower-division university classes of colleagues, accompanied by a brief explanation of my project, specification of possible mature content in *Embedded*, and a short time to answer questions possible participants had. Students who volunteered for my study were asked to respond by email and indicate which *Embedded* viewing they were able to attend, after which specific instructions were sent to participants via email. I executed follow-up emails three days prior to study date to verify volunteer attendance and to answer questions participants may have had.

Volunteers were asked to choose one of the two evening viewings two weeks prior to chosen dates. Each viewing began at 7:30 p.m., the traditional curtain time for theatrical events, and took approximately 2.5 hours to complete, including introduction, viewing, and, completion of demographics

questionnaire and response sheet (see Appendix C). Refreshments were provided for respondents. Other incentives for volunteers included season subscriptions to the Old Lyric Repertory Professional Theatre with additional class credit offered to students recruited from JCOM 2010 and theatre students as agreed upon by theatre colleagues. A single research assistant, also the undergraduate teaching fellow for JCOM 2010, managed the viewing following a brief introduction. Viewings of *Embedded* began punctually following the seating of all volunteers. I provided a brief introduction to the study, in which I outlined the schedule for the following 2.5 hours, provided general information about the play, introduced the research assistant, and answered any questions. Following my brief introduction, I exited the room leaving the research assistant to continue the process as instructed.

Following the 90-minute film, participants were provided with a 10-minute “intermission” to use lavatory facilities and refresh food and drink. Participants were instructed not to discuss the play with each other during the break. According to the research assistant, viewers chose to forgo the intermission and immediately began responses. Respondents were arranged in a spacious manner throughout the room and instructed to write a very candid account of their reactions to the play. Participants had 60 minutes to respond in an open ended, self report essay describing personal reaction to *Embedded*. Participants were asked to take care in producing a legible essay, although focus on grammar and spelling were downplayed. After completing essay responses to the play, participants turned in all materials to the research assistant and were excused. The research assistant collected all completed essays, thanked respondents for participating, distributed theatre ticket incentives, and closed the room. Before leaving, the research assistant placed essays in a large envelope and transferred to me for analysis.

Feasibility Study: Process and Findings

A feasibility study executed a year prior to my actual viewer response research produced results from a small-scale audience reaction study using *Embedded*, which provided a model for my 2007 study. This investigation resulted in rationale for continued research in this area, and exhibited preliminary evidence of what future research may produce. The feasibility study nearly mirrored the more formal research project. Like the 2007 process, I recruited volunteer viewers from English, journalism, and theatre classes, maintained contact with participants, and reserved facilities that were conducive to an audience

reaction study. A different space was utilized for the feasibility study but maintained similar equipment and attributes. There were two primary differences between the formal research study and the feasibility study. First, the feasibility study included a smaller sample size, with 50 student volunteers divided between two viewings. Second, the feasibility study involved use of two distinct response formats. More specifically, the first group of volunteers used an open ended self report essay question (see Appendix D) to describe their reactions to *Embedded* while the second group of participants were provided with a more specific questionnaire for responses (see Appendix E). Again, the viewings of *Embedded* were conducted in a similar manner as the formal research study, including time, use of research assistants, refreshments, and inclusion of an intermission for viewers. A more detailed account of the feasibility study, results, and analysis follows.

Group A, night one. The feasibility study was conducted with help of two research assistants who were also employees from the theatre department public relations office. The initial viewing of *Embedded* was held on Tuesday, April 11, 2006. Research assistants circulated a sheet so volunteers seeking class credit could be identified. I did not view the role sheet or connect a name to a viewer. With care not to skew results, I provided a vague, brief introduction to the study describing what was to take place during the next 2.5 hours, general information about the play, introduced my two research assistants, and directed any questions from viewers to assistants. Following my brief introduction, I left the room leaving the two research assistants to continue the process as instructed.

Participants were given a short, anonymous demographics questionnaire (see Appendix F). By asking these questions, I obtained a partial view of an audience members' pre-conceived opinions and attitudes, preferences, bias, and primary use of theatre (e.g. attend for escapist entertainment, social function, or social awareness). Respondents were asked to submit this form with their essays following the play. After all participants completed the questionnaire, research assistants began the viewing of *Embedded* and monitored the room for disruptions, walkouts, or other problems.

Following the 90-minute play, participants were offered a 10-minute intermission to use lavatory facilities and refresh food/drink, after which, participants had 60 minutes to respond in an ended self report essay (see Appendix D) describing their personal reactions to *Embedded*. After completing the essay in response to the play, participants turned in all materials to one of the two research assistants and were

excused. Research assistants collected all completed essays and placed them in a large manila envelope. Respondents were thanked for their participation and given theatre tickets for the Old Lyric Theatre Company's 2006 season. After all respondents had left, a research assistant provided me with responses.

Group B, night two. The second showing of *Embedded* took place on Wednesday, April 12, 2006 and continued in essentially the same manner as night one with Group A. The difference between the two evenings was the type of essay response given to viewers following the play. Group B responded in self-report essay form, but rather than addressing a very open-ended question, respondents answered five specific questions regarding their reactions to the play (see Appendix E). By using both methods in my feasibility test, I discovered which form of response format provides the most useful results for my larger study. After reading viewers essays and questionnaire responses, the former indicated more open expression of viewers' reactions and greater detail in describing their interpretations. The use of the questionnaire method was useful in identifying audience preferences and dislikes of the play, which provided insight into analysis of *Embedded's* use of different dramatic elements and genres and how the play may resonate with political, religious, and cultural allegiances. By combining the two types of responses, I obtained very open, candid responses and reactions to re-occurring themes of protest in the play. This provided usable results that were analyzed according to my framework.

Analysis of Feasibility Study

I analyzed essays relating responses from viewers to the individual subjectivities explicated, including political, religious, and social allegiances and ideologies. I conducted a close textual analysis of all viewer responses, noting both positive and negative "critical" reactions to *Embedded*. I identified consistent themes in respondent essays, including comments concerning narrative structure, genre, and commentary in *Embedded*. I compared essay responses to demographics and was able to obtain a preliminary view of how *Embedded* may be interpreted according to some viewers' relevant allegiances and ideologies. For the purposes of my feasibility test, I paid special attention to identifying consistent themes in the responses in order to discern which type of essay method provided a more in-depth, insightful response. The results of my feasibility test provided a basis for the continuation of my study.

Results of feasibility test. Not knowing what to expect from an audience reaction study based on a war protest play, the feasibility test functioned as a case study for my formal research. I found that in both the open-ended essay form and essay questionnaire, audience members provided a number of responses that when compared to demographics of the viewer, appeared to both challenge and reinforce likely pre-conceived ideologies and allegiances. Among respondent essays, similar themes and comments were also evident, which provided a positive indication of data available for my future study's interpretation of results.

Open-ended vs. questionnaire. After examining responses in open-ended, self-report essay and essay questionnaire forms, I concluded that the use of open-ended essays provided results most useful to my research. Although some questionnaire responses did provide indication of relevant reaction, thought, and insight into viewer content preferences according to their life experiences, viewers who wrote open-ended essays tended to be more contemplative, and wrote responses with more passion, inflection, and deliberation. In contrast, responses from the questionnaire seemed to be directed by the question and were much shorter. Perhaps this format initiated respondents to think of the survey as a test, or they had no reason to contemplate and write because the thought was already there. Avoiding as much research bias as possible is vital, and after analyzing the questionnaire, I determined that asking a specific question about the *Embedded* could inadvertently lead respondents into answering in a specific manner that they may think might to be the correct answer, thus generating bias results.

A key point to make when comparing these two methods for my study was how the essay responses developed as the viewer spent time writing. Unlike questionnaire responses, viewers who wrote open-ended essays seem to have more time and reason to think deeply about what they had just seen and how the play might be negotiated into their lived experiences. In other words, these respondents had more time to reflect on their feelings and opinions, and more time to let the images and messages from the script "settle." Research assistants verified this, as they noted that viewers on the second night when the questionnaire method was used, took less time to answer questions.

For example, in one instance of open-ended essay response reporting, a female viewer's feelings and thoughts seem to shift from frustration to a reflection of how disconnected she is from the war. In this case, it seems that writing the essay response initiated more critical thought about what she saw and what

she was writing. The more writing she did and the more time passed, her reaction became less reactive and more reflective and thoughtful. This viewer begins her response with the statement: “This play was frustrating. Completely FRUSTRATING [respondent emphasis]. I hated the special forces board room of politicians. HATED [respondent emphasis]! It was sick and stupid.” As she continued to reflect and write about the play’s other narratives, her tone and language changed: “I have not kept with the war at all. Not really even from the beginning. It’s sad really. The message is right but it hurts and is disheartening and disgusting and unfortunately it’s true.”

In contrast, questionnaire responses were short and to the point. It seems that viewers read the question and answered quickly, leaving little time for thought and reflection. Often, answers were not in complete thoughts. As one example, when asked about initial reactions to *Embedded*, a viewer answered, “scattered, random, thought provoking.” Although this response indicates reaction, it does not delve as deeply as the open-ended essay responses. For this reason, I chose to use an open-ended essay response method for my formal study.

In sum, the feasibility study proved valuable in developing a framework for my formal research project, results of which provided insight into how a piece of anti-war theatre is interpreted by a group of college students with conservative religious and cultural subjectivities. Individual responses to *Embedded* are important to consider, as attempting to further understand how and why dissent is individually perceived as a measure of democratic vitality or as a detriment to society may assist in creating the “oblique angles” (Ivie, 2007a, p. 240) necessary for realistic and pragmatic protest and legitimization of dissenting voices. In furthering research of public perception of social protest, my second research question poses: How do college students in a predominantly conservative LDS population respond to and interpret *Embedded* and its anti-war themes? Results of this query are detailed in the *Viewing Anti-war Theatre: Spectatorship Response Analysis* section of this investigation.

As specified, to obtain a personal and public perspective of how *Embedded* was interpreted, my first research question asks how theatre critics framed the play. How media traditionally frame protest groups and how film critics may influence discourse about cinema have been previously discussed. My analysis of how theatre critics framed *Embedded* attempts to broaden these conversations, both by drawing theatrical dissent into how anti-war protest is performed and by expanding how media frame groups

opposing the status quo, in this case theatre reviewers. Results of this interrogation are presented in the next section.

CHAPTER IV

FRAMING ANTI-WAR THEATRE: CRITICS AND *EMBEDDED*

Reviews of *Embedded* were overwhelmingly negative (21), with only 29% framing the play positively (6). Differences among discussions of theatre elements and characters in reviews were minimal, and all mentioned the three major plot lines in *Embedded*: soldiers, politicians, and journalists. For this study I am not concerned with whether or not reviews were positive or negative. Rather, I seek to examine how reviewers framed the play's anti-war message and the piece's relationship with the larger issues of protest and critiques of conflict, political elites, and embedded journalists. My analysis of reviews make visible underlying ideologies critics' implement that serve to support their reading of *Embedded*'s anti-war message. After a close textual reading of all reviews, two dominant frames were explicated: (1) shooting the messenger and (2) shooting the message. I argue that critics' use of these framing strategies worked to limit the ways *Embedded* may be read by audiences.

Shooting the Messenger: Tim Robbins as an Anti-war Spokesperson

According to Watkins (2001), when covering protest events, journalists often frame stories around the action of individuals who "achieve newsworthy credentials" (p. 98). For example, in his analysis of the Million Man March, Watkins found that journalists chose controversial figure Louis Farrakhan as the main character and source of tension, resulting in a narrow interpretation of what the march was attempting to accomplish. Farrakhan was the primary focus of journalists' frames, and because he served as the media's personifications of the march, other aspects of the demonstration were excluded: "Journalists effectively screened out other frames that could have rendered the march and the complex web of factors that ignited interests in it more recognizable by making Farrakhan the most salient issue/problem" (p. 98). In other words, by emphasizing Farrakhan's involvement in the march, journalists' framing decisions stigmatized the action as an expression of racism rather than a protest of inequality (Watkins). Watkins argues that this diversion of focus ultimately marginalized the Million Man March and the protest's attempt to address complex issues of race relations.

Similarly, I argue that critics' reviews of *Embedded* narrowed the play's attempt to address broader issues surrounding the Iraq War by framing Tim Robbins as the most relevant issue of the work.

By emphasizing Robbins' stature in Hollywood and his extensive history in activism, critics framed Robbins as a privileged protestor who used his celebrity status as a "podium for his anti-war views" (Kissel, 2004, ¶ 7). As such, I assert that critics' focus on Robbins' celebrity drew attention away from perhaps more complex readings of the play or its protest message. Reviewers' emphasis on Robbins' career as a liberal activist and member of the Hollywood elite framed the playwright as outside the common public sphere, possibly limiting the range of potential interpretations of *Embedded*'s protest and the larger scope of the play's narratives. For example, according to Howard Kissel's *New York Daily News* review:

If you or I had sent a slapdash and adolescent script as *Embedded* to the Public Theater, the wary literary manager might not even have sent back a standard rejection letter, lest it invite a correspondence with a writer who was clearly a crank. But then you and I are not celebrities. Tim Robbins is. This is why the Public is presenting *Embedded*, as performed by an L.A. company called the Actors' Gang (Even its name suggests theater as a form of hoodlum-ism. (¶ 1)

Kissel's review framed *Embedded* around Robbins, suggesting that the Public Theater's staging of the play was a matter of his celebrity status or newsworthiness rather than based on the validity of the play's protest or anti-war voices. In a similar vein, *Variety*'s Charles Isherwood (2004a), suggested that if Robbins weren't a celebrity, "these limp musings on the Iraq War would hardly be gracing the stage at the Public Theater" (¶ 7). Interestingly, Kissel specified the distinction between Robbins' status and the general populace's, noting that "you or I aren't celebrities," and that "Robbins is" (¶ 1). These critics' emphasis on the distance between Robbins and spectators served to isolate Robbins from the general public, deeming him and his activism as outside normative societal boundaries and audiences. This distance was further emphasized by Kissel's comparison of the Actors' Gang theater as "hoodlum-ism" (¶ 1), a comparison that positions the play within the context of gang-related behavior, thus working to further distance the overarching message of the play from the average American. Similarly, Frederick Winship of *United Press International* (2004) labels the group as a company of "renegade theatre artists," framing the Actors' Gang as peculiar and a disruption of cultural civility. Again, the contrast between the Actors' Gang led by Robbins and the general viewing public narrows the potential relevancy of Robbins' protest message for audience members. As such, Robbins and his troupe may be considered divorced from the common

ideologies of what Kissel refers to “you and I” (§ 1). Ultimately, the distance reviewers placed between Robbins as celebrity spokesperson and viewers worked to dilute *Embedded*’s anti-war message, creating a boundary between protestors and potential viewers. The message of the dissent underlying the play’s narratives was marginalized and restricted to a single, polarizing figure by critics, a frame I articulate as *shooting the messenger*.

The framing of Robbins as the focal point of *Embedded*’s protest message was a common device in the majority of reviews. For instance, David Skinner (2004) of the *Weekly Standard*, noted that Robbins “WAS ONE OF THE MOST OUTSPOKEN [original caps] of entertainment figures to criticize the war in Iraq” (§ 4). Focusing on Robbins’ celebrity status, Skinner continued: “Under his own byline in the *Nation* magazine, on the podium at protest rallies, before a select audience of Washington media, the Oscar-winning actor made a pulpit of his celebrity” (§ 4). Winship (2004) stated that *Embedded* “reflects Robbins’ well-known liberal political views, his oft-stated opposition to the war in Iraq and his belief that the White House clique behind Bush’s foreign policy carefully controlled reporting of the invasion” (§ 3). Online theatre journal *Backstage.com* emphasized that Robbins “has never been shy about airing his political beliefs” (§ 1), while *The Daily Breeze*’s (Torrence, CA) Jeff Favre (2004) wrote that Robbins “has never shied away from articulating his feelings about the war in Iraq” (§ 1). Ben Brantley (2004) of the *New York Times* specified that Robbins is “well-known for his refusal to stay silent on public issues about which he feels strongly” (§ 3), and Pamela McClintock (2004) from *Variety* observed: “The actor is well-known for his political activism and anti-establishment views” (§ 2).

Stressing Robbins’ history of activism and celebrity status, identifying him as a privileged, professional activist who used his status as a “soapbox” (Kissel, 2004, § 8) for political ends, is a framing device that labeled his anti-war activity as another item on a long resume of protest work. This further distanced Robbins’ from the viewing public, who were encouraged to perceive Robbins as a professional agitator and a divisive political figure and thus, an individual to whom average Americans could not identify. In essence, the distance critics place between Robbins’ protest play and the larger audience discouraged a broader discussion of *Embedded*’s themes, while focus on Robbins’ alleged polarizing politics stigmatized *Embedded* as an expression of celebrity self-indulgence. Reed Johnson (2003) of the *Los Angeles Times* commented on “the Hollywood star’s outspokenness” (§ 4). The *Wall Street Journal*’s

Terry Teachout (2004) wrote: “Tim Robbins is one of those movie stars who suffers from the delusion that being rich and famous means he must also be smart” (§ 1).

Another interesting sidenote of critics’ framing of Robbins is how a handful (4) of reviewers incorporated Robbins’ role in the film *Bull Durham* and the controversy surrounding the actors’ exclusion from the Baseball Hall of Fame’s anniversary celebration of the movie. In response to their vocal opposition to the war in Iraq, Robbins’ and Sarandon’s invitations to the fifteenth anniversary celebration of *Bull Durham* in Cooperstown were withdrawn by the president of the Baseball Hall of Fame, who accused the couple of putting American troops in danger (Werner, 2003). Robbins’ link to *Bull Durham* and baseball was also addressed in other critics’ reviews. Brantley (2004) and Kissel (2004) refer to Robbins’ conflict with the Hall as a product of backlash from his anti-war sentiments. On two separate occasions in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Desmond Ryan (2004a) referred to Robbins’ role in *Bull Durham* and the issue involving the Baseball Hall of Fame. For example, in a March 2004 review, Ryan wrote:

When the people who run the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown canceled a special screening of *Bull Durham* to rebuke Tim Robbins for his vocal protest of the war in Iraq, they might have expected the maverick actor-director to trudge quietly to the showers. But they might have also remembered that in *Bull Durham*, Robbins played Nuke Laloosh – the pitcher with the million-dollar arm and 10-cent brain. Robbins can play hardball too, and his volatile response to his establishment tormentors is called *Embedded*. (§ 1)

More interesting is how these critics framed the conflict between Robbins and the Baseball Hall of Fame. Cooperstown represents one of baseball’s most hallowed establishments. Accordingly, critics’ focus on Robbins versus the Hall may have suggested something with deeper symbolic meaning to potential audiences. By emphasizing Robbins’ status as contradicting the symbolism of America’s pastime, these critics framed Robbins’ protest as in direct conflict with American identity. Focus on Robbins’ exclusion from the *Bull Durham* celebration suggested that *Embedded*’s protest is considerably distant from acceptable cultural ideals. By emphasizing Robbins’ “maverick” (Ryan, 2004a, § 1) status, especially a status distant to that of a traditional American identity, critics demonized *Embedded*’s protest narratives.

Highlighting celebrity status, critics framed Robbins as a famous maverick, both simplifying *Embedded*’s protest into a narrow frame and separating Robbins’ activism from what might be considered

mainstream culture. Emphasizing Robbins' status also limited viewer readings of *Embedded* by assigning Robbins to a position as a performer rather than a legitimate source of information or dissent. Bishop (2006) found that a primary frame used by journalists covering Iraq War protests was the selfishness frame, in which activists were portrayed as personally driven rather than politically motivated. Similarly, I argue that critics' focus on Robbins marginalized *Embedded*'s anti-war message. Reviewers' emphasis on Robbins' career as an activist is similar to what Watkins (2001) found in news coverage of The Million Man March. According to Watkins, while covering the protest, journalists located a "deviant" character in Louis Farrakhan and employed frames that highlighted the controversial figure as the face of the march and emphasized his position as outside cultural boundaries. As such, Watkins argues that The Million Man March was stigmatized and marginalized as divisive, narrowing any discussion about the complex and diverse racial issues surrounding the movement. In similar fashion, critics' framing Robbins as the primary character and primary source of tension shifted attention away from the play's message while distancing Robbins from a larger public, fundamentally trivializing *Embedded*'s anti-war protest message. The next section details how critics also engaged in shooting the message.

Shooting the Message: Embedded as Propaganda

The second framing device explicated from the reviews involved dismissing the message of *Embedded* as somewhere between "bracing agitprop and preachy overkill" (Siegel, 2004, ¶ 3). Critics applied the "shooting the message" frame by consistently labeling *Embedded*'s anti-war narratives as propaganda, biased, appealing only to a small group of like-minded anti-war believers, or as David Skinner (2004) from *The Weekly Standard* declares, "a convention of conspiracy-mongers" (¶ 1). By marginalizing the play's protest message, critics' further trivialized *Embedded*, working ultimately to widen the distance between the viewing public and the fringe group of those who, according to critics, may have aligned themselves with the play. I argue that by categorizing the work as biased propaganda limited to like-minded anti-war audiences and an angry protest with an extremist agenda, reviewers dismissed *Embedded*'s broader message while shifting focus away from the issue of Iraq and further distancing viewers from its protest narrative.

Many reviews framed *Embedded* as propaganda for audience members who “already know the hymnal by heart” (Ryan, 2004b, ¶ 5). The religious tone critics articulated in their reviews is important to note. Reviewers consistently focused on *Embedded* as a form of preaching, implying a religious-like fervor of anti-war activity. By framing *Embedded*’s audience as limited to a fringe group, critics deemed the play and its viewers as peculiar and outside rational behavior according to societal guidelines. For example, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*’s Ryan commented that while watching *Embedded*, “your seat feels like a choir stall,” as the play is “talking to like-minded people” (¶ 5). In an earlier review Ryan (2004a) wrote that *Embedded* “is not so much preaching to the choir as addressing a congregation” (¶ 5). Skinner (2004) noted that Robbins used *Embedded* as “a pulpit of his celebrity to let the world know that people who thought the way he does are unable to voice their dissent in America’s hostile political climate” (¶ 4). According to *The New York Times*’ Ben Brantley (2004), *Embedded* is “preaching to the choir” (¶ 1), and “winds up sounding like last Sunday’s sermon” (¶ 2). *Variety*’s Deborah Young (2004) referred to *Embedded* as “preaching to the converted” (¶ 1), while Hilton Als (2004) of *The New Yorker* commented: “Sermonizing rarely makes great theatre” (¶ 7). Again, framing *Embedded* as a message similar to a type of religious fervor further distances the play from mainstream society, demonizing the play’s message, ultimately positioning it into a deviant and marginal position outside mainstream societal boundaries. In essence, potential viewers may have been encouraged to dismiss *Embedded*’s anti-war message as a kind of religious ardor.

Related to framing *Embedded* as an expression of passionate and fervent radicalism or belief, critics also categorized it as a work of biased propaganda, in which describing the play as based on falsity or conspiracy possibly restricted interpretations of *Embedded*’s message and expression of protest. By narrowing the play’s perceived audience in their reviews, critics focused on the detachment and conflict between anti-war citizens and those on the pro-war side, perhaps working to negate any negotiated or nuanced readings of the information presented by the play. Malcolm Johnson (2004) of the *Hartford Courant*, Kissel (2004) from the *Daily News*, and Als (2004) from *The New Yorker*, referred to *Embedded* as “agitprop,” a condensed label of agitation propaganda, terms that can be read as deviant activity. Specifically, Johnson considered *Embedded* to be a “sophomoric piece of agitprop” (¶ 1). *Variety*’s Charles Isherwood (2004a) and Robert Nott (2004b) from the *Santa Fe New Mexican* also employed the

term in their reviews. Emphasizing the conflict between anti-war and pro-war groups, Ed Siegel (2004) from *The Boston Globe* wrote: “There is a time-honored tradition of agitprop that rallies the anti-war troops in times of conflict” (§ 5). Again, critics’ reviews framed *Embedded* as an activity of deviant protest action, in direct conflict with pro-war notions and the larger public, possibly alienating viewers and restricting interpretations of the play. *Embedded*’s protest message was reduced to propaganda meant to agitate rather than inform or incite discussion. According to the Pew Research Center (2008), at the time of *Embedded*’s debut, public approval of the invasion of Iraq was at 71 percent, a number that may be reflected by critics’ reviews of the play. Within this context, it is no surprise that critics’ deemed the play in conflict with the general viewing public.

Reviews also frame *Embedded*’s message as appealing to a group beyond rational societal discourse by reducing perceived audience members to “unapologetically partisan” (Johnson, 2004, § 6) and “conspiracy believers” (Skinner, 2004, § 9). *UPI*’s Frederick Winship (2004) noted that “the play is likely to please the already convinced” (§ 10), while Robert Hofler (2004) from *Variety* remarked that “there were liberals galore” at an opening performance in New York. Michael Kuchwara (2004) from the *AP* wrote: “It’s difficult to imagine just who the audience is for this show” (§ 12). While Winship and Hofler framed *Embedded*’s message as limited to a specific political allegiance, Kuchwara’s question framed the play’s protest message as questionable for anyone. The simplification and trivialization of the information presented by *Embedded* as relevant only to a limited category of the public marginalized the message, and ultimately the anti-war narratives presented. In other words, the protest message was dismissed as irrelevant to a larger section of the public.

Interestingly, critics also framed *Embedded*’s message as applicable to “conspiracy believers” (Skinner, 2004, § 8). Skinner remarked:

I expected the new antiwar drama *Embedded* to be artless, thudding propaganda, filled with commonplace observations passed off as a major expose. What I didn’t expect was a play that might have been written for a convention of conspiracy-mongers. (§ 1)

Teachout (2004) wrote that *Embedded* embodied “hairbrained conspiracy theory” (§ 3). Similarly, Favre (2004) commented on the play’s ability to “strike at the heart of any conspirator’s fears” (§ 8). As reviewers framed *Embedded*’s narratives as representation of conspiracy, the play’s message was framed as

a radical or outlandish anti-war argument lacking any substantial fact or legitimate information, or as an attempt to undermine the war effort. Thus, potential spectators may have been dissuaded from taking the protest message seriously, categorizing it as an exaggerated performance of falsities or radical theory. In essence, the play's anti-war narratives were marginalized as a scheme or a trick meant to undermine public support for war.

Finally, reviews of *Embedded* framed the play's narrative as a threatening and confrontational attack on war supporters, specifically referring to the piece and Robbins' message as a violent response to the war in Iraq. Subsequently, describing *Embedded* with terms usually indicating an irrational retaliation or attack on civilized society demonized the play's anti-war message as violating rational discourse. For example, the *Hartford Courant*'s Malcolm Johnson referred to *Embedded* as a "Brechtian attack" (§ 1), while *Variety*'s Joel Hirschhorn (2003) labeled the play "an angry echo" (§ 1). Reed Johnson from the *Los Angeles Times* (2003), referred to *Embedded* as being fueled by "outraged intelligence" (§ 4) from "one angry hombre" (§ 5). The term "hombre" is an interesting choice of words to consider. Reflecting the traditional Western image of a lone renegade out for justice or revenge while disrupting a peaceful and united community with a violent attack, "angry hombre" brings to mind the concept of an outlaw who is a substantial threat to the populace. Later in his review, Johnson wrote: "But like a crack special forces unit, *Embedded* is most effective when it's on the attack" (§ 14). Alexis Soloski (2004) of the *Village Voice* stated that *Embedded* "presents a bewildering plan of attack" (§ 1). This framing device was consistent in reviews, with critics alluding to the hyper-confrontational and direct nature of *Embedded*. For instance, Robert Feldberg (2004) of *The Record* (Bergen County, NJ), wrote that Robbins "wields a sledgehammer" (§ 3) to drive the message home, and Kuchwara (2004) reiterated, remarking that Robbins "opts for the sledgehammer approach" (§ 2). Again, framing *Embedded*'s message as a violent retaliation, one with a chaotic or unpredictable plan, suggests an unreasonable response or an unpatriotic rebuke to the majority of America.

Reviews consistently described *Embedded*'s anti-war message as an enraged rant, implying that the play's narrative has little purpose other than to vent anger at the Bush Administration. For example, in July, Desmond Ryan (2004b) deemed its message a "traditional tirade" (§ 10). Kissel (2004) framed *Embedded* in much the same way: "*Embedded*, written and directed by Tim Robbins is just a screed

against the war in Iraq” (§ 4). As such, by framing *Embedded* as a simplistic rant, these reviews may have limited the range of interpretations, framing it as a protest with little substance. It may be easier to dismiss a message if it is framed as a simplistic rage-filled argument. Accordingly, critics may have encouraged viewers to consider *Embedded* as too extreme to address issues surrounding the war in Iraq. According to Soloski (2004): “It would seem that complex rhetoric is just another casualty of war” (§ 3).

Ultimately, reviewers framed *Embedded*’s anti-war message with strategies that worked to limit audience interpretations of the broader themes addressed in the play while situating its protest narratives beyond what might be considered rational discourse or expression of dissent, further distancing *Embedded*’s expression of protest from viewers. In referring to *Embedded*’s pulpit quality, critics framed the play as a form of religious extremism, encouraging viewers to perceive the anti-war message as a applying to a radical congregation located on the fringe of rational society. As a result, reviewers’ concentration on the perceived bias and agitprop message in *Embedded* may have also limited audience perceptions or distanced viewers from *Embedded*’s protest. By framing potential audiences as a group of like-minded individuals who oppose the war, critics drew attention to the conflict between pro-war and anti-war groups, simplifying *Embedded*’s message as appealing to the protestors on the fringe while agitating the general populace.

Shots Fired: Framing Analysis Implications

According to Stout et al. (1999), the vast majority of people will not see a play firsthand, rather, “they will rely on the interpretations of critics in the mass media for a summary as well as an opinion about the play’s content and theme” (p. 136). As such, it is important to understand framing strategies articulated by critics, especially when discussing an anti-war play during American involvement in war. As discussed, *Embedded*’s anti-war message was overwhelmingly ridiculed. Beyond the framing devices examined, it is important to consider other factors involved in the marginalization of *Embedded*.

One reason for critical skepticism of *Embedded*’s satirical critique of the Iraq War may be the alternative or experimental format of the play. The direct nature of the piece and its combination of multimedia and traditional theatre elements may have limited its legitimacy within the theatre industry. Perhaps the satirical nature of the play is no longer prevalent as a method of theatrical protest, with more

naturalistic and nuanced accounts of social issues as the preferred format (Heilpern, 2006). According to Williamson (1992), critics can, and do, disregard experimental or unconventional attempts of artistic expression. *Embedded's* unconventional approach and controversial subject matter combine for a challenging work with which critics must grapple. Allen and Gomery (1985) noted that “normative limits” at specific times in history obstruct interpretation of a work that is “different” or does not “fit neatly into the customary frames of reference” (p. 90). As such, a work may not adhere to “normative stylistic standards,” thus challenging critics to formulate a review based on familiar or dominant ideologies while narrowing interpretation (Allen & Gomery, p. 90). In her research of critics’ reviews of *The Siege*, Hall (2001) found that dominant themes underlying reviews included the intentions of the film’s creators and constraints of the genre. Similarly, critics of *Embedded* ultimately focused on the intentions of why Robbins and The Actors’ Gang produced the play and concentrated on the limits of the play’s use of the theatrical genre, satire.

It is important to take into account the timing of *Embedded's* debut and subsequent reviews. In March 2003, the invasion of Iraq began. In April, Saddam’s statue fell in Firdos Square, and on May 1, President Bush, dressed as a Navy pilot, disembarked from a jet fighter on the deck of the *U.S.S Abraham Lincoln*, and later in the day, in front of a large banner reading “MISSION ACCOMPLISHED,” declared victory in Iraq. Media Matters for America (2006) looked back at the media’s laudatory stance in coverage of Bush’s premature declaration. *MSNBC's* Chris Matthews called the feat an “amazing display of leadership” (Media Matters for America.org, ¶ 3). According to Brian Williams, now the *NBC Nightly News*’ anchor, “not all presidents could have pulled this scene off today” (Media Matters for America.org, ¶ 31). The print media joined in the collective praise. In a May 2, 2003 *New York Times* article, David Sanger wrote: “He hopped out of the plane with a helmet tucked under his arm and walked across the deck with a swagger that seemed to suggest what he had seen in *Top Gun*” (¶ 5). While he walked across the deck of the *U.S.S Abraham Lincoln*, Bush enjoyed a 71% approval rating (Pew Research Center, 2003). *Embedded* debuted within a culture that celebrated these events, and in essence maintained a stance that was in conflict with the jingoism prevalent in most of American society during this time frame.

Five years after the launch of the U.S. led invasion of Iraq, public opinion has turned increasingly negative. According to a public opinion study conducted in February 2008 by the Pew Research Center,

54% of those polled indicated that the decision to invade Iraq was incorrect. This number is in stark contrast to a 71% public approval rating for the invasion in March 2003 (Pew Research Center). On March 19, 2008, the five-year anniversary of the Iraq invasion, President Bush cited more success and progress in Iraq due in part to the surge of 30,000 troops implemented over the past year (Eggen, 2008). The President also reasserted claims that Osama Bin Laden and his followers have played a central role in the Iraq conflict (Eggen). Still, as President Bush cited progress, his approval rating dropped to 31% (Steinhauser, 2008). While nearly two-thirds of the public said the war is not worth fighting (Eggen), 82%, according to a recent *CBS News* poll, say that U.S. forces should be out of Iraq before the end of the next president's term (LaPlante, 2008a).

It is thus reasonable to assume that reviews of *Embedded* may have been reflecting a larger media trend of supporting the war effort and maintaining faith in political elites and the U.S. military. Indeed, following September 11 and through the invasion of Iraq, national sentiment and patriotism did affect public culture during the war while influencing press coverage (Ravi, 2005). According to Ravi, even those who are against the war often mute their voices once battle begins to avoid accusations of "giving comfort to the enemy" (p. 59). Ravi argues: "When a nation's troops are on the ground in a war, support for the troops becomes the accepted value that is accepted without question" (p. 59). As such, this translates into some degree of deference to the president as commander-in-chief who makes decisions on the war (Ravi): "Increasing levels of social trust led to positive, mutually reinforcing evaluations of government institutions" (Kern, Just, & Norris, 2003, p. 295).

Kern et al. (2003) argued that media coverage that unquestionably adopts government frames does not serve the public well. In a society that is joined around terrorist activities or conflict, they explain domestic news frames can go unchallenged and government and media elites will largely concur in their perceptions about war and the necessary steps to maintain public support. Realization of complicit alignment with the official frame by mainstream media outlets came on May 26, 2004, when editors of the *New York Times* offered an apology for the paper's lack of rigorous reporting: "Looking back, we wish we had been more aggressive in re-examining the claims as new evidence emerged – or failed to emerge" (§ 3). Similarly, as Williamson (1992) suggested, entertainment critics rely on current cultural ideologies in evaluating subjects. Perhaps reviews of *Embedded* immediately following its debut and DVD release

reflected a cultural dismissal of protest while American soldiers were just beginning the long battle in Iraq. Accordingly, within the current cultural atmosphere of uneasiness about the Iraq War, *Embedded* may be viewed as a more legitimate source of information or protest activity. It may be that *Embedded's* message of dissent was discounted early as political and media elites and the majority of American citizens supported an invasion of Iraq as a legitimate policy of protection, or as a matter of supporting the troops. As discussed, since the beginning of the war in Iraq, an extensive catalog of Iraq War plays have been produced, and this growth may indicate more acceptance of questioning Iraq on stage.

Although there may be a possible correlation between the prevalent pro-war sentiment surrounding the majority of America's public at the time *Embedded's* reviews were written and the dismissal of the play's protest narratives by critics, analysis must also consider the roles media have traditionally maintained in depicting social protest. Critics' framing strategies of *Embedded* are consistent with Gitlin's (1980) argument that the media consistently serve to marginalize protest groups that challenge the status quo, narrowing, simplifying, and demonizing activists' actions while negating their social criticism and downplaying their effectiveness. Indeed, McLeod and Hertog (1999) argued that "when protestors challenge the system, they often get a hostile response from authorities, the public, and the mass media" as a result of marginalizing framing devices used to portray public dissent (p. 309).

According to McLeod and Hertog (1999), the perceived degree of militancy and extremism exhibited by the protesting group is an important element in how media frames define the group's activities. As such, the greater the perceived measure of extremism and militancy, the more likely "its members are to incur the brunt of social control messages" (p. 310). In other words, as media understand protestors' methods as beyond the acceptable societal boundaries, frames used to define protest actions are likely to delegitimized. Such is the case with Tim Robbins and *Embedded*. The play's overt and confrontational tone and its sharp departure from the status quo were deemed as too militant, too extreme by theatre critics, who emphasized the distance between the Actors' Gang's radical behavior and the natural decorum of society. Further, reviewers emphasized *Embedded's* extremism and militancy by also distancing the general public from the play's audience members, who were considered to be on the fringe of society and framed as a radical congregation for *Embedded's* extremist messages. As a result, the play's protest narratives did indeed take the "brunt" of what McLeod and Hertog describe as socially controlled

messages. Critics dismissed *Embedded's* substantive information as located beyond the status quo, which reinforced the public's hostile perception of protest and suppressed dissenting contributions to the discussion of the Iraq War. This may have assisted in maintaining a complicit public, perpetuating the nature of social control through media framing of protest. Accordingly, discourse surrounding military action in the Middle East was narrowed by critics, consistent with Gitlin's (1980) assumption of media's disregard for activism, integrating "what can be absorbed into the dominant structure of definitions and push the rest to the margins of social life" (p. 5).

McLeod and Hertog (1999) argued that media rely on distinct story types that ultimately marginalize a protest group's activity. Interestingly, critics' framing of *Embedded's* protest message was similar to several of the methods outlined by McLeod and Hertog. For instance, McLeod and Hertog describe one style of marginalization as "the carnival frame," which "treats protestors as performers engaging in theatrical entertainment" (p. 312). Dardis (2006) found this same frame in his analysis of Iraq War protest coverage. By default, this frame is relevant to the Actors' Gang method of dissent, which was literally a performance. Although McLeod and Hertog are more likely referring to activists taking on a performative role in marches and rallies, it is valid to consider *Embedded's* satirical performance style when analyzing reviewers' framing of the play. In other words, although the Actors' Gang's protest is in fact a performance, it may have been the overstated level of performance that critics found problematic and carnivalesque. McLeod and Hertog also specify another framing device used by journalists to marginalize protest groups that is closely related to the carnival frame. The "freak show" frame, according to McLeod and Hertog, emphasizes the obvious deviance and oddities displayed by protestors, which places activists at a distance of what might be considered normal behavior (p. 312). In his typology of Iraq War protest marginalization devices, Dardis (2006) found that the freak show frame is still a primary instrument used in depicting protestors. Again, as critics referred to the Actors' Gang as a group of hoodlums taking part in deviant extremism, their classification of the play and performers is consistent with methods implemented by journalists in reporting protests groups, which are marginalized by emphasis on the distance between activists' behavior and that of the status quo.

In addition, McLeod and Hertog (1999) and Dardis (2006) have identified the "romper room" frame in media coverage of protest. This frame portrays dissenters as "immature deviants engaged in

childish antics” relegating protestors to be perceived as selfish and juvenile in their activities (McLeod & Hertog, p. 312). Similarly, in examining press coverage of Iraq War protests, Bishop (2006) found that a primary frame used by journalists to marginalize oppositional voices was the selfishness frame, in which anti-war activists were depicted as “self-indulgent” members of the “me generation” who participated in protest activities as “something to do, rather than something to believe in” (p. 49). The selfishness frame used by journalists can be associated with how critics of *Embedded* framed Tim Robbins as a prominent Hollywood actor and career activist who was simply using his position and influence to protest in an attempt to add “another entry on a resume” (Bishop, p. 49) filled with political activism and starring roles. Indeed critics’ framing of Robbins as an elitist, selfish radical reveals a link between how reviewers marginalized *Embedded* and how journalists consistently dismiss anti-war protestors who oppose the existing state of affairs. The focus on Robbins by critics conforms to how Watkins (2001) has argued media “attach newsworthy subject matter to individuals, especially those who carry high levels on name recognition” (p. 91), a framing device that shifts public focus from productive dialogue of a protest group’s message to “a single, polarizing figure” (p. 99), which restricts discourse and the space for critical reflection. Tim Robbins himself was a primary topic for reviewers of *Embedded*, and as such, their focus on the actor/director/playwright/activist as a source of tension in the play’s anti-war message reveals another consistent framing device used by media in depicting dissent. Similar to Watkins’ claims of how focus on a singular actor in protest activity marginalizes opposition, critics’ framing of Robbins as the polarizing figure relegated *Embedded*’s attempt to broaden discussion of the Iraq War to the margins and narrowed discourse to Robbins’ controversial standing and celebrity status. Accordingly, critics’ framing devices in reviews were consistent with how media have traditionally represented anti-war protest, a troubling trend in a democratic project.

Kern et al. (2003) argued that after 9/11 the consensual news frames left little room for democratic debate, thus, they asserted: “It is important to understand the framing process, not just for its own sake, but also of the influence that frames can have on the political process, public policy, and international affairs” (p. 298). It is my assertion that understanding frames articulated by entertainment critics, especially during a period of war, is also important due to the potential influence reviews maintain in public discourse. According to Hall (2001), critics represent a group of public intellectuals who assist viewers in making

decisions about entertainment options. In that sense, reviewers educate the public, and if cultural ideologies maintain a significant role in critics' evaluations, reviews leave little room for public debate or expressions of alternative messages that challenge the majority voice. According to Dardis (2006), research into "broader areas" of framing research provides "deeper insight into current knowledge regarding the dynamics surrounding media coverage and protest groups" (p. 132). In other words, extending framing research beyond what is commonly accepted as media can build on our understanding of media's coverage of social protest groups and allow further discussion about the role a wide variety of media take in shaping socio-political issues. My examination of *Embedded's* reviews thus contributes to a broader understanding and discussion of how media frame anti-war protest.

CHAPTER V

ANTI-WAR THEATRE NARRATIVES: SPECTATORSHIP RESPONSE ANALYSIS

After examining viewer responses to *Embedded*, three dominant frames were evident: 1) radical anti-war protest, 2) allegiance to authority, and 3) fact versus fiction. Most LDS and non-LDS viewers maintained distinct interpretations of *Embedded*, with the majority of LDS viewers discounting the play's protest and the majority of non-LDS viewers embracing its confrontational narratives. As such, results suggest that in the case of *Embedded*, theatre critics' reviews may have reflected reality in their descriptions of Robbins' work, in that anti-war messages were welcomed by those with similar sentiments and rejected by viewers whose subjectivities were in opposition of *Embedded*. There were a few instances in which LDS viewers found *Embedded* to be insightful and a few instances of condemnation of the play by non-LDS respondents. Although such examples do provide some indication of the possibility that *Embedded* may serve as a legitimate work of dissent, they did little to distract from the overwhelming evidence of the play's polarizing reactions among these college students.

Interpreting Anti-war Protest Narratives

While the vast majority of LDS respondents found *Embedded*'s protest problematic and dismissed the play's protest narratives, the majority of non-LDS viewers embraced the play's confrontational nature. In the case of *Embedded*, LDS respondents who noted the play's overt nature seemed to grapple with the very idea of its protest. Similarly, non-LDS viewers, for the most part, didn't classify *Embedded* as protest. However, non-LDS viewers openly described *Embedded* as a reflection of their sentiments or deserving of praise for its humor and expression, confirming the play as legitimate dissent.

LDS viewers and Embedded's protest. A number of LDS viewers perceived *Embedded*'s protest as simply too confrontational to be considered legitimate. For instance, a male respondent categorized the play as a "political outcry" and "mostly just complaints" (#1), while a female Mormon participant viewed *Embedded* as "a little too radical for me" (#20). Other LDS viewers labeled *Embedded* as "pretty sensationalist," "ridiculous" (#19), and "a pretty radical idea" (#58). Describing *Embedded* as "insane," a female viewer called the play "a nice excuse to be radical" (#16). A male participant wrote that he "couldn't take it serious" (#6), as another male viewer noted: "It seemed so extreme that it made the point

they tried to get across look bad” (#10). According to another female LDS respondent, “the satire was so extreme” (#12) that *Embedded*’s credibility was questioned. Still another female LDS viewer perceived the play as “ranting” (#3). One particular male LDS respondent disagreed with the theme and message of *Embedded*, arguing that “writers of this play and all other anti-war material use the exact same methods of pulling at ones emotions as those in support of the war” (#30). He also questions the motives behind the play, asking: “I will be interested to see what Tim Robbins and many other anti-war activists will be fighting when it is no longer popular to publicize it.” Not only dismissing *Embedded* as too boisterous to be effective, a male LDS participant argued that the play “degraded the effort of our troops during war time” (#9).

The concept of anti-war protest as demeaning to military personnel is consistent with what Andrew Bacevich (2006) described as “the new standard of civic responsibility” (p. 108). According to Bacevich, contemporary American militarism comes with no sacrifice by the majority of citizens, and as such, members of the civilian class are almost required to affirm the mythical goodness of the soldier and the military by “flag-waving rhetoric” (Bacevich, p. 108). It makes sense then that describing anti-war protest as degrading the troops by LDS viewers is congruent with the historical merging of the LDS church with the larger United States culture. Walker (1982) emphasized that consistent support for war by LDS members has developed with the church’s historical, and complicated, integration into the American body politic. Walker noted that for the LDS church to be legitimized by the national government, it has established a strong devotion to the government elites leading the country. Accordingly, it is reasonable to assume that church members are encouraged to express similar allegiance to those in political power. If, therefore, the new citizen’s required sacrifice in time of war is to support the troops, it is not surprising that this LDS viewer responded to *Embedded* as he did. As previously mentioned, Utah has lowest number of active duty military personnel serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, yet maintains steady in approval for the wars (LaPlante, 2006b, 2008b). Thus, considering Bacevich’s measure of sacrifice required by citizens at a time of war, by dismissing protest as anti-troop, these LDS viewers may perceive themselves as actively fulfilling their civic duty.

Ultimately, many LDS viewers framed *Embedded*’s protest as an activity in conflict with interests of democracy. Two respondents summarized this sentiment, interpreting *Embedded* as an illegitimate

action. According to a male LDS viewer, the play's narratives of dissent represented "an issue of whining" (#45). Another male LDS respondent claimed: "Today we want to complain and rally for peace instead of standing up for it" (#44). In other words, dissent does not serve an important role in the debate over the Iraq War. In another example, a male Mormon respondent wrote: "It made [me] feel put off about the anti-war effort side of the argument because so much of it was no more than rhetoric without a point" (#43). By relegating protest to a pointless display of language, this respondent dismissed anti-war protest as an unproductive activity of little value to the discussion about the war in Iraq. Again, we might correlate this type of response with the cultural and religious perception that protest is not a patriotic activity.

These responses may reflect the accepted religious and cultural boundaries of dissent among members of the LDS church during a period of war. While members of the Mormon Church adhere to the belief that "man's duty is to obey his government, whatever its virtue" (Walker, 1982, p. 54), these responses suggest that protest of war, specifically an activity that overtly confronts war, is outside acceptable boundaries of behavior. As explained previously, former church president Gordon B. Hinckley informed church members that "it may even be that He [God] will hold us responsible if we try to impede or hedge up the way of those who are involved in a contest with forces of evil and oppression" (Hinckley, 2003, ¶ 32). As such, it may be that these viewers understand anti-war dissent as an unpatriotic gesture, or even as an act in conflict with the word of God. As discussed, May (2006) found that 45% of Utahns see protestors as aiding enemies of the United States, and that only 27 percent "embrace the alternative view that 'they play an important role in the national debate over U.S. policy in Iraq'" (¶ 3). As such, anti-war protest may be perceived as a fringe activity, significantly distant from the mainstream populace in Utah. These LDS viewer responses to *Embedded* echo this opinion.

Deeming anti-war protest as a detriment to the public conversation about Iraq and relating troop support to war support may be a factor of Utah's continuously low active-duty numbers, as reported by LaPlante (2006b, 2008b). Accordingly, the relatively low number of Utah casualties as a result of the present conflict may deter Utahns from personally connecting with loss in Iraq and Afghanistan. In essence, the majority of Utahns have lower incentive to protest the war. As young LDS members are encouraged to serve church missions prior to military service, perhaps Mormon Church members' pro-war stance reflects a need to feel supportive of the U.S. effort without actually contributing bodies to that effort.

In other words, rather than providing active duty personnel, Utah provides a sustained pro-war voice. In contrast, other regions more affected by casualty statistics may have a distinctly different perspective of supporting the war. It may also be important to understand the LDS Church missionary program. By sending young men into various global locations to proselytize and recruit members, perhaps church members understand this action as similar to serving overseas for perceived virtuous reasons (Walker, 1982).

One LDS viewer's personal experience with war reflected the possible distance between Utahns' support of Iraq and actual sacrifice in Iraq and Afghanistan. According to the respondent, her brother served in Iraq both during Desert Storm and the current conflict. She commented: "The play made his [brother's] family's anguish even more real" (#14). She also indicated a more critical and humanistic perception of the war: "I thought that the scenes showing that the 'enemy' [doctor] as really kind and caring was [sic] important we are often misled about the fact that the enemy is more like us than different. They are humans too and not evil." In essence, this viewer's immediate relationship with conflict seems to be a factor in how she interprets the Iraq War and how she perceived *Embedded's* anti-war narratives. This participant was the only LDS viewer to note a personal connection to the war in Iraq, which may have heavily influenced her response.

This is not to say that there weren't instances, which LDS viewers interpreted *Embedded's* protest as legitimate. For example, a female LDS viewer concluded: "At first I thought it was over the top, but by the end you saw all the elements and recognized all the stories you had seen, and that made it credible" (#38). Some LDS viewers seemed to interpret *Embedded* from a more negotiated stance, navigating between acceptance and denial of different elements of the play. For instance, an LDS viewer "thought it was very good on how they portrayed issues about the war that no one hears about" (#10). Another respondent indicated that the play was "well written" (#11), while a self-described active LDS participant indicated that "it was a good effort" (#13). Other LDS viewers commented that *Embedded* was "funny and presented an opposing view to the war in Iraq in an entertaining way" (#42) or "simply necessary for the point" (#31). While an LDS viewer claimed to "like it for many reasons" (#48), another wrote that "the idea of the play was very good" (#59). Expressing some surprise at the experience, a Mormon viewer commented the he "actually enjoyed the play very much" and thought that it was an "eye-opening

experience” (#23). This respondent seemed perplexed at his reception of the piece, suggesting that he was attempting to balance institutionally approved evaluations of *Embedded*’s anti-war narrative with his own independent appraisal.

However, comments such as this were noticeably absent among the majority of LDS viewers. The failure to simply recognize *Embedded* as an act of dissent is equally problematic. Beyond considering the play an expression of radicalism or sensationalism, nearly all Mormon students failed to identify *Embedded* as protest, seeming to automatically dismiss the narratives as outside acceptable cultural boundaries. What respondents omitted in their responses was recognition of *Embedded* as a work that challenged the status quo. These viewers’ responses suggest that a lack of individual experience with dissent in Utah may have an effect on how LDS respondents framed anti-war protest as radical action rather than a contribution to the marketplace of ideas. Since cultural and societal limits in Utah place protest on the margins of acceptable activity, it is also reasonable to consider that simplified and marginalized mediated depictions of anti-war activity might also assist in these viewers’ framing of *Embedded*. As such, LDS participants failed to consider the play as an act of dissent. Rather, *Embedded* was consistently labeled as something other than protest. In other words, the concept of protest as an active element of public discourse was not relevant to them and possibly beyond the scope of their religious and cultural ideologies. Cohen and Ribak (2003) argue that a text is pertinent to a viewer if it is relevant to that individual’s self-identity, life experiences, and ideologies. In contrast, if a message is not relevant to these factors, it can be dismissed as “less pleasurable” (Cohen & Ribak, p. 122). Thus, considering the prevalent negative reaction to anti-war dissent in Utah (May, 2006) and the tradition of inaction on Utah college campuses (Smith, 1995), it is reasonable to conclude that anti-war protest, regardless of medium or method, is not relevant to these LDS viewers. Accordingly, these participants may not consider protest as a realistic or legitimate response to authority by citizens.

The dismissal of *Embedded* based on this perception of anti-war dissent as unacceptable is problematic. By referring to the work as “an issue of whining” (#45) or “rhetoric without a point” (#43), these participants marginalized the play’s protest activity while reinforcing the perspective that protesting the war in Iraq is an unpatriotic or treasonous activity (e.g., May, 2006). This sentiment, of course, is in direct conflict with the democratic standard of dissent, which has recently been expressed by over 90

nationwide anti-war demonstrations held at college and high school campuses across the nation in March 2008 (Sorg, 2008). For LDS viewers, interfering with a contest of what church leaders describe as good versus evil is a foreign concept.

Non-LDS viewers and Embedded's protest. Generally, non-LDS viewers seemed to interpret *Embedded* from an opposite position, specifically commenting on the play's reflection of their own anti-war sentiments. For example, a non-LDS female respondent noted: "I currently don't agree with the war and this helped to confirm my feelings towards it" (#22). Another female participant indicated that *Embedded's* anti-war messages "are very much like mine" (#33). Similarly, a male non-Mormon viewer wrote: "This play pretty much shadows how I feel about the war in Iraq" (#32). In contrast to the dismissal of *Embedded's* protest based on the radical and sensationalist nature of the play by LDS viewers, other non-LDS viewers embraced the play's overt tone and artistic statement. For instance, a male atheist perceived *Embedded* as "well written" and enjoyed the "intentional humor" (#36). A Catholic male found "themes that I haven't thought about for awhile because of how enraging they are to me" (#70). In addition, this participant seemed to not only relate to the play, but also to the individuals involved in the production: "Thank God I am not the only person out there who feels as I do." A religiously and politically unaffiliated female viewer perceived the play as both "entertaining and though provoking" (#72), while another unaffiliated female "enjoyed viewing this play," labeling *Embedded* "entertaining and funny" (#75). One non-LDS viewer framed *Embedded* as ineffective as protest, though he "felt that the play was an excellent play" (#67). Later in his response, this respondent wrote: "I feel like sometimes protesting isn't enough. People need to start taking actions into their own hands." Indicating a starkly different position to LDS viewers who disregarded *Embedded* as too radical, as "an issue of whining" (#45) or as degrading to the troops, this particular non-LDS respondent perceived *Embedded's* narratives of protest as too benign to make a difference.

Although the overwhelming majority of non-LDS viewers did perceive *Embedded's* anti-war message as a legitimate form of dissent, there were instances in which non-LDS viewers found the work problematic. For instance, a male respondent wrote: "I strongly believe protesting in forms even such as this are important, but to simply insult without any fact shown to back it up only hinders their objective to convince anyone except the gullible or pre-convinced" (#69). Interestingly, this viewer recognizes the act

of protest as an important aspect of a democratic project, yet also grasps the concept of what Robert Ivie (2007a) understands as reducing the “distance between dissenters and the ruling information of authority they wish to challenge” (p. 109). In other words, Ivie argues that protest “must transcend the hostile imagination,” in which the polarity of protest activity perpetuated division and dehumanization of the us versus them conflict” (p. 114). This particular viewer’s response suggests that although he does believe that protest is vital, he may perceive overt and confrontational methods to be counter-productive.

Compared to LDS viewers’ perceptions of protest narratives in *Embedded*, non-LDS respondents who celebrated the play may form their interpretations of the work more independently of religious or cultural ideologies. Perhaps LDS viewers have little experience or exposure to confrontational protest, while non-LDS members maintain a broader view of dissenting action. As LDS viewers might rely on church leaders and distance from actual combat casualties to sustain support for the war in Iraq, non-LDS viewers may include more diverse information sources to form opinions about the war and acts of dissent. According to Blais (1984), Mormon Church members have a tradition of strong support for U.S. wars and rely primarily on approved church approved media and information sources. As such, LDS viewers may have considered President Hinckley’s 2003 statements suggesting that members “be mindful of another overriding responsibility, which I may add, governs my personal feelings and dictates my personal loyal” (§ 25), and “that there are times and circumstances when nations are justified, in fact have an obligation, to fight for family, for liberty, and against tyranny, threat, and oppression” (§ 30). In essence, while specifically referring to the Iraq invasion, church leaders emphasized the justification of “circumstances” in which an obligation to combat is necessary. It seems to fit then that anti-war protest is deemed irrelevant by most LDS viewers, while protest is a welcomed occurrence to non-LDS viewers who rely less on approved information sources or authoritative proclamations.

According to Michael Ryan (2004), individual frames are partly based on “past experiences, religious feelings, values, and educations” (p. 364). As such, responses suggest that both LDS and non-LDS viewers seemed to form interpretations of *Embedded*’s anti-war message accordingly. Besides conflicting perspectives of anti-war protest, another primary frame between LDS and non-LDS viewers’ reactions to *Embedded* is the allegiance to authority.

Behind the Masks: Government Authority in Embedded

The second dominant frame explicated from responses is the allegiance to authority frame. Like conflicting attitudes of protest expressed by LDS and non-LDS viewers, the degrees of allegiance to authority between the two groups were strikingly different. Accordingly, LDS viewers seemed to find *Embedded's* depiction of government leaders problematic, while non-LDS viewers overwhelmingly related the portrayal of the Bush Administration to their own impatience and criticism of the nation's leaders. As such, analysis suggests that LDS respondents relied heavily on church doctrine to defend leaders from *Embedded's* criticisms as non-LDS participants seemed to rely on more independent rationale to interpret the play's disparagement of the current administration.

LDS viewers and allegiance to authority. Statements by church leaders, the relatively high percentages of approval by Utah Mormons, and historical progression may all help to explain why LDS viewers of *Embedded* interpreted the play's depiction of authority as outside acceptable cultural boundaries. Nearly half of Mormon viewers perceived *Embedded's* Office of Special Plans as "very exaggerated" (#23) or "misrepresented to a certain degree" (#28), and portrayed in an offensive manner. A substantial portion of LDS viewers indicated that the politicians in *Embedded* failed to accurately represent those in power. Rather, these respondents defended government authority figures, possibly indicating an adherence to obedience to government leaders, as LDS doctrine stresses. For example, a female LDS viewer wrote, "the play went a little far when speaking of our special forces group. Though we may not always agree I believe the depiction of their sessions [were] crass and unjustified" (#46). Though indicating that *Embedded's* depiction of politicians was "good," a male Mormon viewer noted that it was "too exaggerated" (#50). Another female LDS viewer defended government authority:

I wonder if the gov. motives as portrayed in this film aren't really so superficial and selfish.

Maybe I have been brainwashed by the gov. but I think maybe they have better intentions for the state of the nation and the people, than anti-war protestors accredit them. (#51)

This statement suggests an uncritical and complicit perspective of authority, as well as Mormon Church doctrine of an inherent trust in the idea that leaders ultimately know more than the public (Hinckley, 2003), are divinely inspired (Blais, 1984), and should not be challenged (Hinckley). As such, while admitting to possibly being "brainwashed" by political elites, she is accepting reliance on religious allegiance and

cultural experience to oppose *Embedded's* protest of U.S. government policy in Iraq. In other words, the viewer seems to be indicating that individual questioning or protesting of authority is unacceptable according to her religious values, even as her acknowledgment of the possibility, however remote, of being “brainwashed” is evident.

Other LDS viewers also found *Embedded's* depiction of politicians to be in conflict with their cultural and religious experiences. According to another female respondent, *Embedded* “mocked the leaders of the USA in a way that was degrading” (#54). A male viewer found the criticism of politicians “over the top” (#56), while another male respondent wrote that “the parts of the politicians” ultimately “made the [Actors’ Gang] crew seem unbelievable” (#59). A female LDS participant “hated the gov. official meetings – they drove me insane” (#8), and another male respondent considered the politicians to be “disturbing and blown out of proportion,” and felt “Bush should be not entirely the fall guy” (#10). A male respondent thought the government officials were portrayed in a way that was “a little stereotypical” (#24). Interestingly, all of these respondents seemed to base their interpretations on religious allegiance, as all but four viewers who commented on the negative depiction of politicians also indicated their political affiliation as moderate, independent, neutral, center, or “light conservative” (#9). This might suggest that no matter how these LDS viewers perceive their political tendencies, the dominant factor in their interpretation of *Embedded's* portrayal of authority is religiosity.

This devotion to authority correlates to Walker’s (1982) assertions that according to Mormon theology, “man’s duty is to obey his government, whatever its virtue” (p. 54). As a result, these LDS respondents may recognize and understand a government’s mistakes, yet according to church authority and religious doctrine, they are discouraged from independently breaking from government policy. Walker also notes that Mormon Church doctrine emphasizes personal purity rather than social responsibility, which places “culpability for war upon government leaders” and “focuses on a combatant’s purposes of the heart and resulting conduct rather than the wartime issues of the moment” (p. 54). In other words, support of government officials may not solely reflect a pro-war position. Viewers may be defending government decisions based on leaders’ “purposes of heart,” or their stated intentions. As noted earlier, according to Egan (2006), support of President Bush by the majority of LDS members seems to be motivated by Bush’s general conservative principles, aggressive foreign policy, and religious faith, rather than specific issues or

trends. Similarly, Utah State University political scientist Michael Lyons (cited in LaPlante, 2006a) points out that Mormons like President Bush because of his openness in declaring his religious devotion.

As such, *Embedded's* protest may be considered in direct opposition to LDS teachings of not doubting motivations of government leaders. For example, one female LDS viewer defends leaders' divine status, perceiving their mortal weaknesses as the reason for their mistakes:

To realize that our country is keeping information from us in order to protect their own ego. To realize that our government may be the strongest they also have flaws. That they too are weak, showing that they too are only human. (#4)

She continued: "Though my religious and political beliefs do not necessarily agree with the *content* of the film I did enjoy it more than I should have. It was a bit of a relief to see the war on terrorism in views that truly make you think [original underline]." Her response still reflects the belief that government officials are divinely chosen and destined to be the "strongest," but it is their individual human characteristics that explains their failings. In essence, it may not be the divine appointment of the authority that is the problem, but the individual leader's human failing. In addition, as indicated by Blais (1984), Mormons receive assurances that they will not be held accountable for their leaders' mistakes, which absolves them from critical examination of their roles in a broader societal setting. The concept of taking responsibility for a leader's actions is not prominent in LDS doctrine, and as such, these Mormon college students frame *Embedded's* politicians as too extreme based on religious beliefs of self-salvation and compliance to government leaders. Reflecting this belief, a male LDS respondent also indicated this type of negotiation: "It's hard for me to be angry with and not respect their [politicians] decisions. However, I do feel that they can make mistakes" (#65). Another viewer wrote: "I understand that maybe not all of the methods used by our government and its leaders are entirely productive and right, but I still feel that their efforts are noble and just" (#9). A response from a female viewer revealed a similar perspective: "It is not in my personal nature to be distrustful of my government and I do feel that the political figures in the play were misrepresented to a certain degree" (#28). Clearly, lack of distrust of government authority can be correlated to religious values adhered to by LDS viewers.

The conflict between attempting to consider *Embedded's* anti-war narratives as a critical examination of the political power structure while defending political manipulation as a human fault may

indicate a negotiated reading of the narratives' condemnation of America's political leaders. In other words, these respondents' independent perceptions of *Embedded* are in conflict with church teachings of allegiance to authority. Again, relating to the Mormon belief that America's leaders are divinely inspired, responses suggests that the nation's leaders answer to a higher power, and may not be accountable according to international or national laws. In the end, leaders' motives are noble and just because they are appointed by divine intervention to orchestrate a battle of good versus evil. Former church president Hinckley (2003) refers to government leaders as maintaining "access to greater political and military intelligence than do the people generally" (§ 22). These viewers' responses reflect this belief, which provides for passive devotion to religious and government authority.

Still, one LDS participant seemed to have a slightly more cynical attitude towards the current administration. According to this female viewer, "I still have some hope in our government maybe not the immediate one. I hope there is a chance for change" (#61). Although at first glance, this viewer may be indicating a more critical examination, she still balances belief in authority with a critical attitude towards the virtue of the individuals in authority positions, again indicating belief in divine assignment of leadership and a critical view of human fault. A more negotiated reading, this response suggests a slight opposition to Walker's assertion that LDS members obey political leaders without taking virtue into account. However, the viewer's "hope for change" may still indicate a passive stance in taking responsibility for change, in essence remaining complicit to authority. In other words, she still understands that her religious beliefs require a supportive position, or at least a position that is in line with the religious doctrine of not actively protesting authority, as outlined by former Church President Hinckley (2003).

It is also important to consider the significant relationship between LDS support for Bush and the president's "unmitigated rhetoric of good versus evil" (Ivie, 2007b, p. 228). Both Walker (1992) and Blais (1984) emphasized that LDS church members interpret America's wars as a battle between good and evil. Consequently, it is logical to assume that Bush's simplistic rhetoric reinforced LDS perception that the war in Iraq is a battle of good versus evil. According to Ivie, while arguing for war, Bush spoke as a Christian man, "crusading for a righteous cause by declaring an unrestricted war on evil," depicted Americans as "a special people watched over by God" (p. 223). In other words, Bush framed those defying America as an "unholy evil, and ambiguous but palpable malevolence that must be destroyed for the nation to cleanse

itself” (Ivie, p. 224). By making it clear that an “enemy with utter depravity” was to blame for the invasion of Iraq, Bush absolved U.S. citizens and U.S. political elites of any guilt (Ivie, p. 230). Ivie notes that simplification of conflict between two sides significantly narrows discussion, creates a polarized society, and prevents any critical examinations of policy. In other words, rhetoric perpetuating the concepts of good versus evil, us versus them, serves to suffocate anti-war protest.

In his infamous statement to a joint session of Congress in 2001, President Bush stated: “You are either with us or you are with the terrorists” (§ 30), severely limiting any liminal space for broadening examination of September 11 or the decisions to go to war. Thus, reinforced by common charges that anti-war protestors demoralize troops and hurt the war effort, the majority of LDS viewers found it logical to side with government leaders, perceived to be the good side. *Embedded*’s portrayal of government leaders challenged the perceived goodness of the Bush Administration and depicted them as less than altruistic. Thus, dismissing *Embedded*’s protest of policy by depicting government officials in a satirical manner was a rational reaction by LDS viewers, who may consider the Iraq War a battle with “barbaric and unholy evil” (Ivie, 2007b, p. 224). Continued support of government leaders and their military policies based on LDS doctrine may have ultimately restricted these viewers’ interpretation of *Embedded*.

In addition, the language and content in *Embedded* seemed to affect LDS viewers’ interpretations of the play’s authority figures. As research suggests, pessimistic views of media by LDS church leaders provide standards for Mormon consumption of mass media, and various mediated texts have been discouraged by church leaders and members (Stout, 1996). Church guidelines and recommendations for appropriate use of media have developed into “a rules-based approach focusing almost exclusively on the avoidance of media depictions considered inconsistent with church teachings,” and as a result, media sources of information outside accepted cultural boundaries may be irrelevant (Stout, p. 88).

As such, a number of Mormon respondents indicated objection to *Embedded*’s anti-war depiction of the Bush Administration based on “crudeness, colorful language, and degradation” (#4). Accordingly, the language used in scenes depicting authority may have overwhelmed some LDS viewers. Not only are those in authority criticized, content unapproved by church doctrine may have further narrowed the possible readings of *Embedded*. A female LDS viewer wrote that she “didn’t really understand most of the jokes and actually found most jokes offensive” (#3), while another female Mormon participant found “parts

of the play *Embedded* to be crude, not just crude but an unnecessary crudeness” (#5). According to a male respondent:

It lost all credibility for me as a result of some of the more vulgar parts. I guess I don’t see why they need to depict groups in authority as receiving some sort of sexually perverted pleasure out of starting a war. I suppose I could just be naïve, but I doubt it happens that way. (#29)

Another male LDS viewer noted that the portrayal of politicians was “derogatory and crude” (#43), while a female respondent found the “frequent use of the F word” to be offensive (#54). Similarly, a male participant criticized the portrayal by arguing that “the language got out of hand” (#56). Other LDS respondents focused less on language, commenting on *Embedded*’s sexual innuendoes. For example, a male respondent wrote: “The President’s cabinet having orgasms over the thought of war? Disgusting, but I imagine some Americans think of them as ravenous Christian heathens” (#1). According to another male viewer, “when they acted like sex driven dogs it pushed the limits” (#48). These responses reflect findings by Stout et al. (1996), who argue that LDS Church members are encouraged to use media deemed positive and worthwhile and avoid other forms of media that may be perceived as detrimental. Stout et al. labeled LDS viewers who strictly adhere to church guidelines of media consumption as “traditionals” (p. 247). In contrast, Stout et al. specify “independents” as viewers who assess media from a more personalized perspective, taking into account a text’s artistic aesthetic (p. 247). Indeed, responses referring to *Embedded*’s language and content as a factor for dismissing the play’s anti-war narratives suggest a more traditional perspective, in which viewers relied on the institution and its authority to interpret *Embedded* as legitimate or illegitimate, acceptable or unacceptable.

There were instances of possible independent interpretations of *Embedded* by LDS members. A female viewer wrote that *Embedded* “provoked emotion and made me question a lot about what actually goes on in our government” (#35), while a male respondent concluded: “I have felt all along the media was [sic] feeding us scripted bullshit” (#41). This viewer continued: “I think it was based on many undeniable truths. I’m sick of this president and his war. I’d like to think that some things will get better, but I have little hope.” A few LDS respondents indicated that *Embedded* may serve as a prompt for examination. For instance, a male viewer wrote that the play was “an eye opening experience” (#23). He continued: “I think every American knows what is happening to a certain extent, but most of us are ashamed to admit it.”

Interestingly, these comments preceded this viewer's criticism of *Embedded*'s politicians as being "very exaggerated" (#23). Accordingly, his reaction to *Embedded* suggests an independent, negotiated reading, in which he seems to use the play as a space for reflection of his role within American foreign policy, while adhering to common LDS faith in authority. Although he was able to consider the Iraq War through an oppositional lens, he was not able to examine leaders' decisions critically. This response may indicate what Stout (2004) considers to be the ability of Mormons to "simultaneously embrace and resist the media environment" (p. 72). In other words, the student extracted what was deemed appropriate while shunning what may be perceived as in conflict with accepted religious doctrine.

According to Stout (2004), Mormons have the ability to both embrace and resist contemporary developments in the media. As such, strategies implemented by Mormon viewers "are not confined to media resistance alone and that interpretive communities can form around secular media use as a means of religious empowerment" (p. 72). Stout emphasizes that individual perceptions of rules validate behavior and define the boundaries of activity within a "conflicted environment" (p. 72). In other words, Mormon viewers rarely consider their behavior to be in violation of the standards set by the Church. Rather, Stout argued that they rely on personal perceptions of church regulations in determining appropriate media usage. In an example of a negotiated interpretation of *Embedded*, a male LDS respondent noted that the play "made me think differently about a lot of issues surrounding the war" before continuing to write that, "I believe the depiction of these sessions were crass and unjustified" (#46). As such, he reasserted a strong faith in authority while attempting a more independent examination of the war in Iraq. This may be problematic: Can an individual critically examine the war in Iraq without relating issues to authority figures or America's leaders? As Lewis and Reading-Smith (2008) reported, it was erroneous information presented and perpetuated by the Bush Administration that led the United States into war.

Still, a small number of LDS respondents (5) found *Embedded*'s protest to be an opportunity for closer inspection of the war in Iraq. A female Mormon respondent mentioned that the play "made me question a lot about what actually goes on in our government" (#35), while a male LDS participant noted: "It evoked in me a desire to change me. To change my education status, my exposure to these events that our children will read about and judge us upon" (#55). In another example, a female viewer wrote: "I thought it was effective and well written" (#38). Later in the response, she commented:

The people who will say this movie was awful and stupid didn't allow it to make them think. You should be objective and take into consideration every point regardless of whether or not you agree with it. This play pointed out what happens when you don't.

These responses suggest more independent examinations of *Embedded's* anti-war message, a more critical view of authority, and less reliance on religiosity for framing *Embedded's* antiwar narratives. In essence, these viewers seem to rely less on cultural and religious allegiances in reading *Embedded's* overt protest, locating the play's narratives within the broader context of the Iraq War and the war's associated policies. Responses such as this, however, were in the minority. According to Blais (1984), "unswerving obedience can only be fostered by reassurances that individuals will not be held accountable for their leaders' mistakes" (p. 64). Blais argues that by refusing to confront issues of individual accountability and individual conscience in times of war, Mormons overwhelmingly adhere to shallow thinking that thrives on simplistic solutions to very difficult moral problems. The majority of LDS respondents seem to reflect Blais' claim.

Non-LDS viewers and authority: "We cannot trust our government" (#66). In contrast to most Mormon respondents, non-LDS viewers wrote appreciatingly about *Embedded's* portrayal of politicians, and mentioned the play's depiction of government leaders in their own criticisms of the Bush Administration's policies. Many viewers specifically referred to a personal "lack of trust in government" (#66) or government "manipulation" (#73) when discussing *Embedded's* politicians. For instance, a male respondent who indicated no religious allegiance wrote: "I thought the panel/the presidency was dead on, where they are only thinking about personal interests rather than the U.S. interests and citizens" (#32). Another non-LDS participant continued: "I just feel it was an excuse for the Bush family to get into Iraq and settle family issues that George Senior had" (#33). Whereas LDS viewers found *Embedded's* portrayal of politicians to be in conflict with their values, the majority of non-Mormon participants did not mention the portrayal's use of profanity or the unflattering depiction of the Bush Administration. Rather, non-LDS respondents related *Embedded's* anti-war message and language to control of information by the Bush Administration, the perceived failings of America's leaders, and current U.S. foreign policy. Critical responses by non-LDS viewers may indicate a more questioning stance based on their religious affiliation. It is possible that these respondents' interpretations of *Embedded's* narratives reflect a marginalized

perspective within the Northern Utah community. In other words, these non-LDS viewers' open acceptance of *Embedded's* satirical criticisms of politicians may reflect their frustration with Utah's lack of protest activity.

Broadening discussion of political portrayals in *Embedded* to war and policy, a male non-LDS participant remarked: "War is just the word that describes oppression. I like that this movie brought up the fact that the U.S. is thinking about what country to impose our values and government on" (#70). Also referring to wartime politics, a female respondent who did not specify religious affiliation commented on leadership experience in conflict: "One part that especially stood out to me was the part where those in authority (those in masks) were talking about how they've never actually fought in a war but they feel as though they understand it and can make decisions because of that illusion" (#72). These two viewers seem to be reflecting on the broader effects of conflict, while critiquing political leaders' ability and motivations for aggression. Again, these responses indicate a broader, reflective approach to examining U.S. leadership and foreign policy matters, revealing a dissenting view, challenging political rationales for war and reflecting on the idea of American aggression. These viewers frame government authority and *Embedded's* portrayal of government leadership within a distinctly opposite framework than LDS viewers. Religious boundaries seem irrelevant in non-Mormon interpretations of authority, which reflect a questioning approach to interpreting government leadership and policy. In another instance, an Episcopalian viewer reveals that the play was informative, before broadening her discussion to a critical examination of U.S. policy and the role all Americans play in their leaders' decisions:

We are a troubled nation that cannot help but breed anger, distrust, and aggression. When our country is being led into that by things like this war that has been conceived in lies, how can we be otherwise. We cannot trust our government. (#66)

In sum, the majority of non-LDS viewers embraced *Embedded's* confrontational narratives criticizing the Office of Special Plans, and in essence the Bush Administration and its policies. In an intriguing response, a Catholic viewer found *Embedded's* masked politicians an improvement of political reality:

I find it interesting that the men in the masks were portrayed as comedic characters to make them more likable in the play when the reality of the whole thing is that their actions and conversations effected [sic] the lives of thousands of people. (#37)

This is of note, considering that all other respondents mentioning the masked politicians in *Embedded* considered the depiction to be more animalistic and less human. Perhaps this student maintained a more open interpretation of the play's political leaders, or perhaps his view of the Bush Administration is more aligned with Robbins'.

Ultimately, Mormon respondents expressed complicity to authority, revealing an inherent opposition to anti-war protest, relying on teachings that government leaders are divinely chosen to lead a battle of good versus evil. Accordingly, questioning authority violates church doctrine, thus anti-war activity such as that displayed in *Embedded* does not appear to be relevant to LDS viewers. Again, this sentiment is reflected by the 45 percent of Utah respondents who view war protestors as aiding U.S. enemies (May, 2006). In contrast, nearly all non-LDS viewers related *Embedded* to their own anti-war sensibilities, using the play critically to examine authority and the Iraq War. The majority of Mormon respondents cited institutional guidelines and religious authority when confronted with an overt anti-war message, dismissing it as a threat to the accepted authority structure or in conflict with church regulations of acceptable media content. In other words, religious beliefs informed most LDS responses and how they framed their *Embedded* experience.

This makes sense when considering LDS leadership and member allegiance to church doctrine, in which, according to Freeman, Mormons are instructed to “submit to kings presidents, rulers, and magistrates in obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law” (cited in LaPlante, 2006a, ¶ 19). According to Blais (1984), neither dissent nor discussion is encouraged in the LDS community, and as a result “the community has become susceptible and even supportive to the influences of contemporary nationalism” (Walker, 1984, p. 54). Unquestioning allegiance to authority is problematic, as it may prevent legitimate anti-war voices from entering discussion while possibly accommodating a leader's dangerous agenda. Blais argues that such obedience “seriously erodes the democratic spirit,” and that conservative politicians “have found to their advantage that uncritical obedience to spiritual authority transfers smoothly to temporal authority” (p. 63). As LDS respondent frames suggest, this transfer of authority may be thriving in Northern Utah, while anti-war protest is marginalized and dismissed by the majority.

Embedded: Fact Versus Fiction

The third dominant frame explicated from viewer responses involves interpretations of fact and fiction in *Embedded*. Much like differences between LDS and non-LDS viewers' perceptions of authority, the two categories of respondents differed greatly in interpreting the substance of information presented in *Embedded*. Specifically, non-LDS viewers considered *Embedded* to be a more accurate and truthful description of the war in Iraq and corresponding policies while the majority of LDS viewers considered the play to be a distortion of reality. Accordingly, non-LDS respondents related to *Embedded's* portrayal of journalistic failings and political manipulation, while LDS participants deemed the play's presentation as biased and exaggerated.

The timing of my study is an important consideration. According to Charles Lewis and Mark Reading-Smith (2008) of The Center for Public Integrity, by 2005, the two primary rationales for the Iraq War had been proven false. Greg Mitchell (2008), media critic and chief editor of online journal *Editor & Publisher*, notes that Paul Wolfowitz admitted in a *Vanity Fair* interview that the threat of weapons of mass destruction was not the best reason to go to war, "just the most exploitable" (p. 9). In addition, examination of records over the five years since the 2003 invasion show that statements by U.S. political elites were part of an orchestrated campaign that galvanized public opinion and led the nation to war under false pretenses (Lewis & Smith). *Embedded* was released in 2003, four years prior to data collection for my study. As such, it is most interesting that the majority of LDS viewers considered the play's critique as biased exaggerations four years after the invasion of Iraq and two years after the primary rationales for invading Iraq had been proven false. This can be related to Mormon faith in authority as discussed in the previous section, but there may be other variables at work in LDS viewers' perceptions.

LDS viewers and Embedded's fiction. Generally, LDS viewers interpreted *Embedded's* narratives as exaggerated, biased liberal lies, or a poor depiction of reality. For instance, a male LDS respondent wrote: "The play wanted to show that the real story and the impact war had on people wasn't being told to the general public. However, the play didn't try and tell reality either" (#6). He continued: "The scenes with Dick Cheney and everyone else failed to create a real picture," while also commenting that "Tim Robbins's play did exactly what he was preaching against. He distorted the truth for his own purpose and cause." Interestingly, this viewer specifically accuses Robbins as using *Embedded* to champion his own

cause, which may reflect a suspicion of elites not in authoritative positions who provide alternative information. Related to this comment are remarks citing “a heavy liberal tone” (#9) in *Embedded*. A male Mormon participant argued that the play was “based on a common liberal opinion w/o facts” (#7), as another male respondent labeled *Embedded* “left-wing” (#56). In the most critical response, a female LDS viewer “thought it was liberal garbage . . . classic liberal sleaze added in to woo the general, [sic] moralless public . . . dripping with exaggerated nonsense” (#2). According to this viewer, *Embedded* is nothing more than “liberal lies and exaggerations.” Suggesting distrust of dissenters, this participant continued: “These people are self-hating, power-seeking money-grubbers. All they want is power and for America to fail in whatever it does, just so they can say I told you so.” Again, relating liberalism to a lack of morals and championing the failure of America reveals a distrust of elite intellectualism. Also, categorizing liberal thought as an evil activity that undermines public morals locates *Embedded*’s protest as distinctly anti-American and not serving the public’s democratic principles. Admitted distrust of protestors reveals support for the idea that anti-war activism is not a valid pursuit, but a harmful scheme to undermine America. Again, this statement reflects commonality with a large percentage of Utahns’ who perceive anti-war protest as demoralizing to troops and supporting America’s enemies (May, 2006). This response also suggests that *Embedded*’s critical anti-war message conflicts with the fundamental belief in Mormon Church doctrine that America’s actions are intrinsically good (Blais, 1984).

LDS viewers found *Embedded* to be biased or one-sided, further dismissing the play’s protest message. A female Mormon viewer wrote that *Embedded* was “ridiculously one sided” (#12). Another female respondent thought the play “was extremely biased” and skewered facts: “A good insightful play tries to see all sides, whereas everything [in the play] skewed to the left” (#13). A male viewer noted: “I thought that it was too one-sided and didn’t portray the facts accurately” (#43). Some LDS participants specifically indicated that *Embedded* should have portrayed “both sides” (#41), and arguing that “both sides should be shown” (#51). For instance, a male viewer wanted “to see the same style of play from a different point of view” (#47). Another response by a female respondent seems to reveal a struggle between truth and an inherent belief of intrinsic American goodness:

I understand that most of the war is unjustified but for a play representing journalism you would think it would want to show both sides as well. It makes it seem like the U.S. are “bad guys” and the Iraqis are “good guys” when in actuality, there are good and bad people on both sides. (#57)

Initially, this respondent recognizes that many of the factors leading to the Iraq War were proved to be false, as depicted in *Embedded*. However, she seems to maintain a desire to understand the conflict in terms that support a belief in the virtuousness of America’s involvement in Iraq. This inclination is also suggested by her reference to *Embedded*’s perceived portrayal of America as the “bad guys.” The possibility that the U.S. invasion and subsequent action against Iraq were not initiated by religious moral reasoning may be in direct conflict with this respondent’s deeply rooted values. As a result, *Embedded*’s anti-war narratives are easily dismissed. These responses suggest that the play contradicts LDS viewers’ beliefs, and by specifically calling for another voice to offset *Embedded*’s narratives, Mormon viewers may desire reinforcement in their belief in the inherent goodness of America’s invasion of Iraq and another perspective that corresponds with their ideologies and religious doctrine. According to Ivie (2007a), individuals are prone to be defensive when they feel weak, vulnerable, deprived, or perceive themselves as being mocked. As such, *Embedded*’s messages may have threatened the confident nature of LDS viewers’ beliefs and values, placing them on the defensive, resulting in a dismissal of the play’s anti-war narratives.

Besides following church doctrine advocating faith in government authority, LDS Church members also prescribe to other traditions that may help explain why viewers of *Embedded* interpreted the play as not based on factual information. Blais (1984) argues that LDS members share the belief that America is inherently good, and it is America’s prophetic destiny that provides every foreign policy endeavor with an altruistic mission. Another element to consider is the LDS tradition of anti-intellectualism, specifically the mistrust of educated elites, or in the case of *Embedded*, Tim Robbins’ status as a prominent Hollywood performer. It may very well be that LDS viewers who framed the play as fiction did so on the basis that Robbins represents a privileged elite participating in activity aimed at upsetting the status quo. Perhaps the most significant factor when deciphering fact from fiction is LDS church members’ narrow world-view, which discourages interest in information outside the influence of the church (Blais). Blais asserts that fear of criticism by church leaders and other members restricts critical inquiry into sources other than those approved by the church’s general authority. In other words, staying

informed of the broader situation conflicts with Mormon teachings. This restricted perception of information and factual accounts may contribute to LDS viewers' interpretation of *Embedded* as fiction and provides little incentive to consider information presented by a source such as Robbins.

Referring again to Utah's relatively high vocal support for Iraq but low active duty statistics (LaPlante, 2007), the framing of alternative messages may also be a result of the distance between Utahns' perception of conflict and actual human casualties. The female LDS viewer who maintains an intimate relationship with someone who served in Iraq also commented on the relationship between truth and recognition of war's individual affects:

Truth during wartime is distorted and this play helped to acknowledge that fact. This [distortion] may be more detrimental than the physical assaults on the battlefield. Many innocent lives are affected at home and abroad. (#14)

This response suggests that the relationship or proximity to the war in Iraq could again be an influential determining factor in how LDS viewers perceive *Embedded's* anti-war message. Taken together, these factors may help explain LDS viewers' overwhelmingly defensive reactions to *Embedded's* critical anti-war message and their perceptions of the play's narratives as purely fiction.

Citing Cohen and Ribak (2003), realism of a text is dependent upon the extent to which a viewer relates to that text. Further, a viewer's life experiences, ideologies, and cultural subjectivities all intersect to interpret form how real a text is. Consequently, LDS respondents who dismissed *Embedded* as fiction may not have considered the narratives in the play to be especially real to them. In other words, according to their cultural subjectivities, life experiences, and ideologies, *Embedded* is not particularly relevant. LDS viewers who failed to contemplate the themes as a possible expression of reality may have found their life experiences to be distant from the work's narratives. There could be numerous reasons for this disengagement. Judging from Utah's low active duty rate, these viewers may not feel immediately connected to the war. As Utah is not considered to be a location for active and engaged in anti-war dissent (Smith, 1995), perhaps these viewers have a restricted perception of protest. It may also be that these LDS participants' religious views encourage a narrow worldview, a strong belief in America's intrinsic goodness, and a simplistic definition of war as good versus evil, which limit what information might be

examined or considered truthful. As a result, *Embedded* was not considered to be a valid source for information.

However, contradictory to the majority of LDS viewers, there were LDS respondents who interpreted *Embedded*'s presentation of information through a more negotiated lens. A few (6) of responses from LDS viewers found the play to be a stimulus for more critical examination of social and cultural ideologies. One such viewer noted: "I am now beginning to believe that quite a bit more goes on than the public knows about" (#35). According to a male LDS respondent: "Though I have agreed with the Iraq War from day one (and still do) my views and assumptions have been put to challenge" (#53). Later in his response, this same student commented: "I believe however, after seeing this it will force me to look more completely at all that is out there and rethink my position on this war." Although the majority of LDS respondents who found *Embedded*'s contradictory information problematic and considered the play to be liberally slanted, biased, exaggerated, and lacking truth, this response indicates that some LDS viewers may consider alternative sources of information when confronting the topic of Iraq. Stout (1996) argues that although independents are a minority within the LDS community, they tend to evaluate media based on more personal, private interests rather than relying on institutional guidelines. My analysis supports this conclusion. Accordingly, the majority of LDS viewers tend to rely more on institution, culture, and social allegiances to make sense of messages that are in conflict with consistently held beliefs, while only a small number of LDS members articulate interpretations of conflicting narratives independently.

Non-LDS viewers and Embedded's reality. By contrast, the overwhelming majority of non-LDS viewers considered *Embedded* to be a realistic portrait of the war in Iraq. Non-LDS respondents found the play to be a factual and accurate portrayal of information, suggesting a more critical and independent approach to understanding the war and the policies of the Bush Administration. For instance, a male non-LDS viewer wrote that *Embedded* was "an accurate representation" (#36), while a female Christian viewer commented: "In the film, I really felt like I was there" (#64). Similarly, another female participant considered the play "an accurate picture of how it's like to be embedded" (#75). Interestingly, this respondent indicated that she "enjoyed" the play "because is showed a side of the war that we really don't see much." This comment is opposite many LDS responses in that this viewer welcomed a more critical

examination of the Iraq War. In essence, she may be relying less on institutional, religious, or cultural authority to interpret *Embedded*'s protest. Reflecting a similar reading of the play, a female Episcopalian viewer expressed skepticism of information received about Iraq: "This play kind of brought to my attention that we as Americans aren't getting all the facts about the war from the press." (#63). It is worth noting that this respondent specifically refers to "Americans" as not receiving adequate information. Rather than relying on social, cultural, or institutional guidelines to assess information provided by media, this viewer suggests that institutions' control of information restricts the "American" tradition of the free flow of ideas. Whereas a large proportion of LDS viewers interpreted *Embedded* as an illegitimate liberal source of information, this viewer was more critical of institutionally provided information, reading *Embedded* as legitimate discourse while considering the content valuable for all Americans.

Institutional control and manipulation are concepts addressed by a number of non-LDS viewers. For example, a female viewer claimed that *Embedded* "showed how the reality of what takes place in the war zone and how it gets twisted into the media 'back home'" (#72). She continued: "The part where those in authority (those in masks) were talking about how they've never actually fought in a war but they feel as though they understand it and can make decisions because of that illusion." Similarly, another non-Mormon female respondent noted: "The people that represented the state really showed how things are controlled" (#68). In another comment, a female participant argued:

I felt the play *Embedded* attempted to shed light on the fact that manipulation and regulation are part of an elaborate scheme from the government and the media. Facts are oftentimes distorted by the press and are relayed to society by the powerful "editors" of the news organizations. Facts are kept secret by the government in order to keep America's slate "clean." I am compelled to question everything I hear and everything I see. Why is the truth so hard to get? (#73)

In contrast to many LDS responses, this viewer's critique of *Embedded* suggests a critical examination of the relationship between elite control of government and media and the perceived goodness of America's foreign policy. Whereas LDS viewers tended to blame the liberal left for mis-information, non-Mormon viewers were more likely to place blame on politicians and journalists, the groups Lewis and Reading-Smith (2008) and Mitchell (2008) accused of falsely leading America to war. This participant openly confesses a need to question information, indicating the ability to assess independently issues addressed in

Embedded. In other words, she is able to transcend boundaries of authority and institutionally acceptable means of information in attempts to form some semblance of truth.

Embedded: *Perception of Protest Narratives*

Fiske (1988) argued that social and cultural allegiances influence how viewers interpret media. According to Cohen and Ribak (2003), a media text that includes elements that are relevant to a viewer's life experiences is more likely to "engage the viewer" (p. 120). Similarly, Entman (1993) noted that if a message maintains a high degree of salience to the viewer, that message is more likely to be perceived, discerned, and stored in memory. Finally, Ryan (2004) argues that individuals use religious values, affiliations, and education in order to assist them in organizing frames that create a social reality. As such, analysis of responses indicates that both LDS and non-LDS viewers of *Embedded* framed the play within their respective, relevant life experiences and individual frameworks to form narrow interpretations of the play. The majority of LDS respondents relied heavily on religious doctrine to frame their interpretations of *Embedded's* anti-war narratives, whereas non-LDS viewers drew on their own affiliations and experiences to make more independent, broader conclusions about the work's message.

Additionally, there were LDS viewers who framed the play more independently. Although LDS viewers who relied on religiosity to interpret *Embedded* significantly outnumbered those with more autonomous evaluations, results reveal two distinct audiences within the sample of LDS viewers. Indeed, Stout, et al. (1996) have argued that LDS viewers consist of two polarized groups: traditionals and independents. According to Stout et al., independents generally describe media on more individual terms, examining content and artistic merit while maintaining a reflexive approach to a mediated text. In contrast, traditionals place emphasis on institutional doctrine and religiosity when evaluating a text (Stout et al.). Like Stout et al. (1996), I found a similar phenomenon in my interrogation of LDS viewer responses. The majority of LDS viewers did frame their responses to *Embedded* within the context of institutional guidelines, but a number of respondents took a more independent approach to framing the play's protest narratives. According to Stout, et al., independent negotiations of media raise more questions about how members of this group frame media texts. Similarly, independent responses from my research ultimately raise more questions about what other factors might be involved in how individuals framed *Embedded*.

Ultimately, if we are to participate in democratic discussion and debate involving war, it is vital to understand how and why anti-war protest narratives are embraced or rejected, and what influences are prominent in perceptions of dissenting activity. While the war in Iraq continues to be a contentious issue, my study suggests that further understanding of why anti-war protests in Utah are consistently dismissed may perhaps assist the development of another incremental step towards what Ivie (2007a) labels “tactics” that contribute “to the articulation of a perspective that transcends the hostile imagination,” (p. 114). In other words, Ivie argues that effective dissent locates and implements commonalities between groups that “reduce the distance between dissenters and the ruling formation of authority they wish to challenge” (p. 109). According to Ivie, a critical argument targeting dominant opinion “must be balanced by an equally firm footing in the underlying culture of values, beliefs, and accepted ways of acting” (p. 109). Perhaps my research can provide insight into how to accomplish this goal for the communication of dissent.

Examples of more negotiated or independent responses may indicate that protest could be considered acceptable in a form not traditionally stigmatized as “protest.” As such, results imply that theatre may be able to serve this role, at least for some. For others, religious and cultural ideologies may be too influential for anti-war theatre to challenge assumptions. Yet, it is still important to understand which ideologies are present and how they might interfere with a more negotiated reading of protest. Such information may broaden boundaries of protest activity and provide methods to transcend barriers that narrow discussion or vilify critical examination of the war in Iraq.

As discussed, the timing of these responses is important. A significant number of LDS viewers responded to *Embedded* by dismissing the play’s anti-war protest as an exaggeration of the war in Iraq or consisting of liberal bias or lies not based on factual evidence. According to Lewis and Reading-Smith (2008), factual information demonstrates that Iraq did not possess weapons of mass destruction nor have meaningful ties to Al Qaeda. These conclusions have been drawn by numerous bipartisan government investigations, including those by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, the 9/11 Commission, and the multi-national Iraq Survey Group (Lewis & Reading-Smith). Viewer responses specifying that *Embedded* is based on lies or exaggerations may suggest an overpowering commitment to cultural allegiances and religious doctrine prescribing faith in government authority and an inherent belief in America’s intrinsic goodness in a battle of good versus evil. As a result, these viewers may marginalize

anti-war dissent as a democratic responsibility while complacently failing to examine the Iraq War through a critical lens.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The intensity of feeling about current events apparently demands something more personal and cathartic than a television clip; a part of the public wants its news with the immediacy and vitality of dramatic art. Unfortunately, a lot of topical theater is short on art and long on indignation, as if the standards of drama can be waived when a play comes wrapped in political good intentions.

George Packer (2008), *Betrayed*

Theatre is a weapon, and it is the people who should wield it.

Augusto Boal (1985), *Theatre of the Oppressed*

My research of how critics and viewers framed *Embedded* contributes to the communication discipline in several ways. This study provides a more complex view of how media and culture impact information outlets, mediums, and interpretations of anti-war protest. In other words, unlike typical communication research of media and protest that involves interrogating press coverage and rallies, marches, or social movements, my research involves broader conceptualizations of protest and media. This in turn contributes an indication of how anti-war protest is interpreted within a wider societal context. My study of *Embedded* provides insight into how media rely on values and cultural norms to influence public opinion and how a specific sample of viewers who are reliant on authority, including media outlets, in framing issues rely on values and cultural expectations in their interpretations of anti-war protest. As a result, critics and viewers maintained a homogenous perception of dissenting voices. My research illuminates a link between news and art, or theatre, that reveals how mass media are interconnected with the larger culture, especially when framing anti-war activity. Finally, my research teases out two master frames from both theatre critics and viewers in their framing of *Embedded*. The “whining for peace” and “anti-war protest” frames reveals how discourse about anti-war protest functions in both public and private conversation and how dissent is still consistently perceived and marginalized in democratic practice.

According to Jane Mummery and Debbie Rodan (2003), despite common stakes in the “protection and deployment” (p. 440) of democracy, irreconcilable perceptions of how to protect the tenets of the system prevent reasoned views and debate while stifling dissenting voices “essential to the democratic process” (p. 439). In their examination of editorial letters published in *The Australian*, Mummery and Rodan examined how discussion surrounding the *Tampa* refugees developed in a public forum. Mummery and Rodan found that letters to the editor tended to “coalesce around two apparently irreconcilable

discourses,” consisting of a strong desire to protect democracy or “our way of life” versus a “globalized humanitarianism,” in which humanity rather than nationalism is the most vital concern (p. 433). According to Mummery and Rodan, “protecting our way of life” is based on the simple distinction between civilization and barbarism, in which protecting the nation from a barbaric other through exclusion is the most effective way to protect democracy. In opposition to this view is the concept of “globalized humanitarianism,” which is based on an inclusive logic emphasizing the common identity of shared humanity. This discourse values an appeal to human rights as the strongest defense of democracy. Ultimately, what Mummery and Rodan found was divisive discourse consisting of “us versus them” (p. 436), in which proponents of both “protecting our way of life” and “globalized humanitarianism” attempted to silence opposition and promote uncompromising positions. Yet, even as the discourse by opposing sides seems irreconcilable, Mummery and Rodan emphasize that those who argue for exclusion and inclusion are arguing the same thing just in different ways. Rather, both groups are seeking the protection of democracy, yet are simply define the debate in contrasting terms.

Similar to what Mummery and Rodan (2003) found in their analysis, results from my study of *Embedded* indicate similar divisive discourse in both critics’ reviews and viewers’ interpretations of Tim Robbins’ play. Two seemingly irreconcilable master frames developed after examining how *Embedded* was framed by reviewers and viewers: fighting for freedom and democracy and “whining for peace” versus American oppression and militarism and “anti-war protest.” The “whining for peace” frame, taken from the label attached to anti-war activists by *Embedded* viewer # 45 , incorporates the inclusive ideals that peace, safety, and American freedoms must be protected from the uncivilized world with military action and unwavering support for American troops while rallying around the flag. This frame prohibits dissenting voices and anti-war protest, privileging U.S. militarism and marginalizing the opposition as weak, ineffective, un-patriotic, and “whining.” In contrast, the “anti-war protest” frame is based on the assumptions that U.S. militarism is based on imperialism that forces American values on other cultures while denying human rights and deteriorating American democracy. In this frame, anti-war dissent is interpreted as protecting justice and liberty and standing up for common humanity. The “anti-war protest” frame is based on inclusion rather than exclusion.

These divergent conceptions of protest in democracy perpetuate an “us versus them” dynamic in which proponents comprising each position view those in opposition as a hindrance to the greater good. Those critics and viewers who adhere to anti-war protest as whining for peace demonize protestors as the radical fringe, framing dissenting voices as counter-productive to protecting democracy. Critics and viewers who interpret anti-war protest as the most important tool for guarding democracy and human rights demonize those in opposition to this view as animalistic, xenophobic, un-human, and only concerned with selfish imperialistic practices. In short, both groups utilize divisive discourse and attempt to silence opposition from “them” to advance their own position. This “us versus them” dichotomy, like Mummery and Rodan (2003) argue, restricts rational and deliberate debate and perpetuates divisiveness. However, it is important to specify that these frames are unequal. Results suggest that both theatre critics and viewers overwhelmingly privileged the dominant message of political and media elites while marginalizing anti-war narratives in *Embedded* as deviant behavior and outside acceptable societal boundaries, results that shed light on how anti-war dissent is perceived within a broader context. In essence, the sentiment in reviews and the majority of responses indicate that anti-war protest does not pertain to freedom, democracy, and peace, while militarism, conflict, and stifling of domestic criticism are considered to be legitimate paths to protecting America.

It is important to note that although the “whining for peace” and “anti-war protest” frames seem irreconcilable, much like what Mummery and Rodan (2003) indicate, adherents to each interpretation have the same end goal of protecting American democracy. However, individuals using either frame understand the process differently. For those using the “whining for peace” frame, protest and democracy are not related, and loyalty to country is the most important way to show patriotism. In contrast, individuals who framed *Embedded* as anti-war protest deem dissent as a valuable tool in preserving American democracy. Take for instance, a recent *Time Magazine* article, in which Peter Beinart (2008) attempts to summarize the divergent views of American patriotism held by conservatives and liberals, and how perceptions of what it means to be a patriot by each group seem both irreconcilable yet connected. For conservatives, patriotism means preserving the past, loving America simply because “it is yours” (Beinart, ¶ 8). In contrast, for liberals, patriotism “isn’t about honoring and replicating the past; it’s about surpassing it” (Beinart, ¶ 16). According to Beinart, when conservatives define being American too narrowly, their

conception of patriotism “risks becoming too clubby” (§ 21). Beinhart argues that by conservative celebration of America “without sufficient regard for America’s sins – it risks degenerating from patriotism into nationalism, a self-righteous, chest-thumping ideology that celebrates America at the expense of the rest of the world” (§ 21). In opposition to patriotism by exclusion, Liberal patriotism “risks not being exclusionary enough,” emphasizing American embodiment of ideals of liberty, justice, and equality rather than symbols (Beinhart, § 22). In sum, Beinhart asserts that conservative and liberal definitions of patriotism can be established in two divergent frames: patriotism as lonely dissent versus patriotism as symbolic devotion. Although seemingly irreconcilable, Beinhart maintains that conservatives and liberals need each other “because love of country requires both affirmation and criticism” (§ 24). Thus, even as Beinhart suggests that anti-war dissent can be considered a vital element in democratic process, the dominant discourses in critics’ and viewers’ responses to *Embedded* privilege the perception that protest is a deviant activity.

According to Catherine A. Luther and M. Mark Miller (2005), when certain frames are consistently adopted, they become “elevated to thematic levels” and absorbed into cultural norms. As such, frames applied to *Embedded* by critics and viewers indicate that interpreting anti-war protest as deviant (regardless of form or method) may be normalized within the public sphere (p. 79). In other words, anti-war dissent continues to be marginalized by dominant pro-war discourses that have been established through consistent framing in the public sphere and the “public screen” (DeLuca & Peebles, 2002, p. 125), or the mediated sources through which citizens develop perceptions. Thus the dismissal of *Embedded* may reflect a broader cultural pattern of marginalization of protest. It is reasonable to conclude then that reviewers and spectators relied on “values framing” (Hoffman & Slater, 2007, p. 60) to interpret *Embedded*. Lindsay Hoffman and Michael Slater argued that underlying principles of framing encourage reference to values to organize positions and interpretations of issues and social behavior (p. 59). The longevity, stability, and influence values have on attitudes and behavior, according to Hoffman and Slater, have a profound effect on how public matters are considered. Reliance on values framing, however, ultimately hinders rational debate and discussion by limiting what Hoffman and Slater referred to as “integrative complexity,” the awareness of “different dimensions of perspective-taking when considering and issue” and “conceptual connectivity among differentiated dimensions of perspectives within the issue”

(p. 61). In other words, values framing endorses reliance on ideologies to interpret events while negating nuances and complexities involved in an issue. The dominant frame critics and viewers applied to *Embedded* indicate that both groups relied on consistently held values to understand the play. LDS viewers framed *Embedded* according to church and community beliefs, viewing dissent as threatening and ineffective, while theatre critics followed a traditional model of marginalization of anti-war protest in media to consider *Embedded* in a similar frame.

Supporting previous research of the relationship between media and anti-war protest (e.g., Chan & Lee, 1984; Gitlin, 1977; McCleod & Hertog, 1995), protest of the Iraq War has been pushed to the margins in mainstream media. According to Bishop (2006), media continue to marginalize dissenters by using stock phrases, stereotyped images, consistent use of official sources, and reports that reinforce perceptions of protestors. Similarly, Dardis (2006) has claimed that media consistently demonize protestors and with consistent devices used to vilify activists who protested the invasion of Iraq. Building on Dardis' typology of common frames applied to anti-war protest, my research indicates that theatre critics' framing of *Embedded* failed to deviate from traditional marginalization of protest groups by media. Rather, I argue that the discourse of reviews perpetuated polarization, assisted in narrowing public dialogue about Iraq, and aligned with the majority of mainstream media and political elites in the disregard for dissent regardless of how opposition was voiced. In attempting to determine failures of anti-war protest groups during the Vietnam era, Justin Gustainis and Dan Hahn (1988) argued that marginalization of dissent by media coverage was a primary extrinsic element that hindered Vietnam War protest. Similarly, critics' reviews of *Embedded* may have worked against interpretation of the play's protest themes and served as a possible extrinsic factor that contributed to the play's perceived failure as legitimate anti-war protest or as an alternative outlet for information that challenged political and media elites' accounts of the war in Iraq.

This is problematic, as reports of media and political failings leading to the invasion of Iraq continue to reveal that the information presented in *Embedded*, though biting and satirical, may not require a leap of imagination. Indeed, in a critical report, David Barstow (2008) of the *New York Times* wrote that a group of retired military officers with ties to military contractors were used "in a campaign to generate favorable news coverage of the administration's wartime performance" (§ 4). These military analysts were taken on tours of Iraq, given classified intelligence, and were briefed by White House officials, all activities

beneficial to their contracting business ventures. According to Barstow, “records and interviews reveal how the Bush Administration has used its control over access and information in an effort to transform analysts into a kind of Trojan horse,” which was intended to shape coverage of Iraq from inside media outlets (§ 7). More recently, former Bush press secretary Scott McClellan (2008) has published an account of his years with President Bush, citing deception by the Bush Administration in its invasion of Iraq (Stolberg, 2008). In *What Happened: Inside the Bush White House and Washington’s Culture of Deception*, McClellan accuses Bush of misleading the nation to war, refusing candor in explaining the invasion of Iraq, and instigating a “strategic blunder” (cited in Stolberg, § 3). Taken to task by his former colleagues in the White House, McClellan was criticized for not raising issues with the president when he was employed by the administration (Stolberg).

According to media critic and editor of *Editor & Publisher* Greg Mitchell (2008), the press has become more critical of the war in recent years, but this shift can now be read as exposing how complacent media were during the invasion of Iraq. Mitchell asserted that “while most of the reporters in Iraq recovered from their early rah-rah ‘we are taking Baghdad’ coverage . . . their counterparts on the home front often fell down on the job” (p. 3). Mitchell continued:

At times, it seemed that they, not their colleagues traveling with our armed forces in Iraq, were the “Embedded” reporters operating under fear of censorship or sanctions for stepping out of line. Declarations from the White House or the military about “progress” in Iraq, or assertions that Iran or al-Qaeda were the true villains there, were reported widely, with contrasting evidence often buried. (p. 3)

According to Mitchell, besides a public apology for faulty pre-war news coverage by the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* ran a critical piece on the front page citing “serious mistakes” in coverage of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq (p. 92). Mitchell noted: “By the *Post’s* own admission, in the months before the war, it ran more than 140 stories on its front page promoting the war, while contrary information ‘got lost’” (p. 93). Within the context of Mitchell’s accounts, *Embedded’s* narratives of criticism during a period in which the press notably failed to “do its minimum journalistic duty” (Mitchell, p. 95) may well have helped to reveal how complicit media outlets helped lead the country into war.

Much of the information needed for critical discussion about an invasion of Iraq was not available in mainstream media during the run-up to the invasion of Iraq and immediately following the occupation. Five years later, narratives and messages in Robbins' play suggest that perhaps the playwright was accurate in many of his criticisms of the invasion and occupation. However, during the time when, according to Mitchell (2008), media outlets overwhelmingly failed when they still had a chance to complicate and question the march to war, *Embedded's* anti-war themes were marginalized and dismissed by professional theatre critics. Overwhelmingly, critics focused on Robbins' persona as a Hollywood activist, distancing *Embedded's* message from the general public. By framing Robbins and The Actors' Gang as a group of anti-American mavericks out to respond to criticism for their protest activities, critics narrowed *Embedded's* anti-war narratives and located the play as significantly distant from social and cultural norms and especially conflicting with the strong jingoistic sentiments that were prevalent when the play debuted. Framing Robbins as an ineffective activist only reinforces common misconceptions of protestors as illegitimate actors in the discussion over war, which are amplified by media outlets and, in this instance, theatre critics. In this vein, theatre critics found *Embedded* to be an effort to trick audiences and undermine public support for the war in Iraq, specifically by emphasizing Tim Robbins' stature as merely a celebrity who was only using theatre to further his agenda.

In addition, based on the report by Charles Lewis and Mark Reading-Smith (2008) that tracked the Bush Administration's use of erroneous information leading up to the invasion of Iraq, it is valid to note how theatre critics framed *Embedded* as a work of propaganda that only appealed to the already converted. Again, even as Robbins and the Actors' Gang may have provided some unpopular but important questions about the war in Iraq, theatre critics framed the play's narratives as only applicable to a portion of the citizenry whose opinions already matched those expressed on stage. Thus, my analysis indicates that the majority of theatre critics also participated in what Mitchell (2008) labeled "rah-rah" reporting, in which the news media failed to probe for why Iraq needed to be invaded. Based on this analysis, theatre critics appear to have fallen into step with the official account just as Mitchell argues mainstream media did. The discourse of reviews reflects the same avoidance to critical questions about the need for war evident in American society in 2003. Much like Michael Ryan (2004) argues that editorial writers failed to offer

diverse voices in the discussion about Iraq, theatre critics failed to consider the role *Embedded's* anti-war message may have served in challenging perceptions of the Iraq War.

Tim Robbins' *Embedded* offered an overt protest on stage and alternative information that contradicted mainstream media accounts and commonly accepted cultural values related to patriotism in wartime. When the play debuted in 2003, media coverage and public support of the Iraq invasion provided little space for *Embedded's* anti-war narratives, and only after the war continued far beyond the initial invasion did the play's critiques appear to be more reasonable. In her seminal account of Vietnam War protest theatre, Nora Alter (1996) argues that anti-war theatre attempted to counteract the influence of the modern press, radio, and television in an effort to "dispel false images propagated by all media" (p. 74). According to Alter, Vietnam War protest theatre adopted an approach using a mass media culture, implementing the Brechtian/satirical use of "real" documents ("real" reports produced by media and government outlets) to "rectify the one-sided perspective with alternative 'real' documents that offer an effective *oppositional vision* [original italics]" (p. 152). With a similar approach, *Embedded* used media and government accounts and multimedia as tools on stage which served as "alternative documents" (Alter, p. 152) to offset the one-sided messages being broadcast and printed by media outlets. In other words, *Embedded* offered an "oppositional vision" (Alter, p. 152) through theatre within a mass mediated culture. In short, *Embedded* attempted a critique of the spectacle with a spectacle all its own. Perhaps The Actors' Gang recognized that spectacular media messages might be necessary for disseminating information to a broad audience. The problem for Robbins' group and *Embedded* was that it seems they fell victim to the protest paradigm (Chan & Lee, 1984). *Embedded* was spectacular enough to be seen and heard, but was also considered too sensational for approval by the broader culture. My research indicates that critics' and viewers' interpretations of the play might simply reflect a broader societal perspective of anti-war protest.

However, it is necessary to consider the relationship between viewers' responses to *Embedded* and religious affiliation. By interrogating responses to *Embedded* by students who are predominantly members of the LDS church, my research examines anti-war dissent as perceived by a population with traditional staunch support of aggressive foreign policy. In other words, *Embedded's* anti-war narratives challenged perspectives of arguably one of the most pro-war populations in the nation (Gehrke, 2008). As such, investigation of how the play was interpreted within this context provides insight into how and why a

population with seemingly unwavering support of the Iraq War perceives dissent in theatrical form. Thus, this sample group served to test the limits of anti-war theatre. Even as a slight decrease in Utahns' support for war has taken place (LaPlante, 2007), LDS students who participated in this study overwhelmingly dismissed *Embedded*'s anti-war message as an unwarranted attack on the nation's leaders, exaggerated bias, and a radical act of dissent. In contrast, nearly all non-LDS participants related *Embedded* to their own anti-war sensibilities. Accordingly, stark differences found between LDS and non-LDS viewers' responses may help provide insight into learning why a high percentage of Utahns perceive anti-war activity negatively. More comprehensively, learning about how specific groups perceive anti-war activity is vital if we are to broaden boundaries of dissent and discussion about the conflict in Iraq. This research may assist in developing a stronger understanding of how specific populations are influenced and how these members negotiate protest messages, specifically anti-war narratives. In other words, how individuals in a conservative cultural and religious environment interpret anti-war dissent might provide insight into how and why cultural boundaries of protest are developed and perpetuated, and may help to advance development of methods that break through those boundaries.

The value framing used by spectators is similar to how theatre critics used values of traditional journalistic practices in framing protest to interpret *Embedded*. Beyond specific group values used by journalists and spectators, it is also reasonable to suggest that they relied to some degree on the jingoistic tone that was prevalent in America following September 11 and the pro-war sentiment in the country during the invasion of Iraq. In sum, both critics and viewers, though separated by years and social positions in their interpretations, appear to have relied on values to frame *Embedded* rather than rationality, deliberation, and prudence. Framing *Embedded* in this manner effectively negated the "integrative complexity" needed to think about war and protest in complex ways (Hoffman & Slater, 2007, p. 59). Thus, critics and viewers reverted to the simplistic perspectives of good versus evil, with us or against us, in which discussion is based in easily defined sides and issues are clearly contrasted, failing to consider the ambiguity and complexity surrounding the themes in *Embedded*.

This is not to say that Robbins' play can be deemed a success in broadening discussion about the Iraq War. *Embedded* may have presented an overt challenge to the meta-narrative by commenting directly on journalistic and cultural norms, but the play's divisive approach also served to extend simplistic wartime

rhetoric. Though *Embedded* attempted to critique traditional journalistic norms of wartime coverage and motivations of political authority, the play's satirical gestures failed to add complexity and ambiguity to the larger discussion, also limiting interpretation. Rather, *Embedded* perpetuated the divisive "us versus them" nature of the pro-war, anti-war argument. During 2003 and 2004, critics already existed in a divisive culture of either/or, and as such it is not surprising that *Embedded* was lumped into the "or" category. Similarly, LDS viewers exist within a culture in which controversy, especially that of war, is constructed in terms of specific boundaries of good versus evil. Again, as *Embedded* exhibits limited ambiguity or complexity, it is also not surprising that LDS viewers dismissed the play, and its protest message, as in direct conflict with their value system. Gustainis and Hahn (1988) argued that perceived radicalism and "lack of moderation" by Vietnam War protestors were too extreme to appeal to the mass public (p. 206). As such, protestors' "disruption of the social order" encouraged average Americans to view them as outcasts and criminals, and regardless of the message they have to offer, it is "unlikely to be received favorably" (Gustainis & Hahn, p. 207). Similarly, *Embedded*'s stinging satire may have influenced LDS viewers' dismissal of the play and their claims that its narratives were exaggerated. As a result of the play's satirical lampoon, LDS viewers may have been unwilling to consider the substance of its narratives and instead relied on values framing to make sense of the information presented, retreating to the traditionally held conception of protest.

Even though Robbins' anti-war narratives may have gained some credibility since 2003, viewer response analysis results indicate that *Embedded* failed to transcend the divisive attitudes surrounding the Iraq War and did indeed "preach to the choir," appealing to those who openly denounce the war, while alienating viewers who maintain a more pro-war stance. Four years following the 2003 invasion of Iraq seemed to provide little softening of *Embedded*'s confrontational message to the majority of this group of Utah State University students. The play failed to be perceived as a legitimate anti-war action and failed to challenge critics' description of a divisive piece of theatre drawing only a select audience. In other words, rather than bringing viewers closer together, the play accentuated the distance between pro-war and anti-war viewers, bolstering the polarization of the two sides. Thus, *Embedded*'s intrinsic factors may have simply perpetuated a negative impression of protest groups, ultimately failing to persuade a larger public to examine critically the official and mediated accounts of the Iraq invasion. *Embedded*'s stinging satire may

have influenced LDS viewers' dismissal of the play and their claims that its narratives were exaggerated. As such, *Embedded* reinforced common assumptions of how protest is commonly identified. In addition, *Embedded*'s more colorful language lends itself to similar reactions by viewers, especially LDS viewers whose religious doctrine specifically denounces media that utilizes obscenity. Thus, *Embedded*'s use of profanity worked to alienate of LDS viewers, again possibly perpetuating assumptions about anti-war activities. In essence, Robbins' and the Actors Gang may have unintentionally distanced themselves from the larger populace and to some degree facilitated marginalization of their message with alienating language.

According to Ivie (2007b), the most effective way to protest war is through an "oblique angle," rather than attempting a starkly opposite message (p. 237). Ivie argues that criticism advanced from a more oblique angle, rather than a reversal of good and evil "is less likely to aggravate stubborn (even desperate) crusades of national vindication" (p. 137), and that polarizing tactics of dissent simply perpetuate public perception of "good and evil" (p. 126). According to Ivie, polarizing acts of anti-war protest render activists as "culturally absurd and exemplifying how anti-war dissent, even inadvertently, might diminish public receptivity to useful and unorthodox critiques of the war on terrorism" (p. 126). In other words, creative and nuanced strategies of resistance may be more efficient in challenging popular notions of war and dissent. Ivie emphasizes the use of "artful dissent" (p. 125) to develop "*ascending tactics of communication that strategically rise above and supersede the rhetoric of recrimination*" (p. 132). Although the Actors' Gang's protest activity can be considered valuable in offering oppositional voices, the group's message may have been restricted by *Embedded*'s confrontational nature. My interrogation of how critics and viewers framed *Embedded* adds insight into possible methods that might be used to communicate the concept that protest is culturally relevant to a larger population, especially to groups with the most hardened pro-war position, such as the LDS viewers who discounted *Embedded*. To confront the limitations on public discourse and interpretation of protest, we need more ambiguity and complexity than the either/or protest offered by *Embedded* and the simplistic framing devices used by theatre critics, and viewers in their interpretation of the play.

The challenge then, is to complicate the either/or positions, counter absolutes with ambiguity, and find avenues that may foster critical examination, rational explanations to controversial and important

international issues, and transcending “irreconcilable” positions by escaping the “double bind” of discursive positions through “a detailed consideration of democracy itself” (Mummery & Rodan, 2003, p. 441). Questions about how protest is perceived are especially vital during times of war. Thus, deeper interrogation of unconventional forms of protest, diverse groups of individuals, and dissimilar populations might reveal a broader range of findings in how to move beyond factional allegiance. It is my assertion that interrogations of how anti-war protest is framed within public and private discourse need to be more contextual, with focus on how specific populations take up and interpret a wide array of anti-war messages. Although my results suggest that extrinsic and intrinsic factors surrounding *Embedded* served to perpetuate the perception of an ineffective attempt at dissent, there is still much that can be learned from these responses to protest theatre.

As discussed earlier, a catalog of Iraq War plays has developed since the invasion of Iraq and these works have been heralded for their naturalistic quality rather than their respective protest narratives. Recent Iraq War plays have been more nuanced and temperate in their interpretations of the war in Iraq, but the numbers of stage representations have increased as popular support for the war has waned. Although plays such as *Black Watch* or *Dying City* have initiated discussion about the current situation in Iraq, *Embedded* was produced during a period in which alternative voices, if legitimized by critics and viewers, may have contributed to dissent that could have made it more difficult for the public to support an invasion of Iraq. In essence, Robbins’ act of dissent can still be considered an important contribution to “the theatre of revolt” (Brustein, 1964) or a single tactic in a larger effort to protest, or portray the Iraq occupation. My study of how *Embedded* was interpreted on a public and private level provides insight, but indicates that more research is needed to broaden the discussion of theatre as communication, performance as protest, and the boundaries of dissent. Other plays, mediums, periods, genres, locations, and many other contingencies provide further research opportunities to bring the fields of theatre and communication closer while seeking what possibilities theatre might have as a rhetorical tool.

NOTES

¹ A list of over one-hundred scripts have been indexed by theatre scholar David Reston for the Sixties

Project of the Viet Nam Generation, Inc. A small sample of prominent Vietnam War plays include:

Balk, H. W. (1972). *The dramatization of 365 days*.

Berrigan, D. (1970). *The trial of of the Cantonsville Nine*.

Difusco, J. et al. (1983). *Tracers*.

Durang, C. (1977). *The Vietnamization of New Jersey*.

Hare, D. (1983). *Saigon: The Year of the Cat*.

Lauro, S. (1988). *A piece of my heart*.

McClure, J. (1980). *Lone star*.

Megan, T. (1966). *Viet rock*.

Rabe, D. (1969). *The basic training of Pavlo Hummel*.

_____. (1969). *Sticks and stones*.

_____. (1976). *Streamers*.

² See for example: Gitlin, 1977; Iyengar, 1991; McLeod & Detenber, 1999; McLeod & Hertog, 1999; Watkins, 2001; Bishop, 2006; and Dardis, 2006.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

List of *Embedded* Reviews

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APPENDIX B

Embedded Study Invitation

EMBEDDED

BY TIM ROBBINS

FREE SCREENING*

WITH A CATCH . . . SEE BELOW

* >

current JCOM master's degree student seeks volunteers to watch a DVD version of contemporary play for study of theatre audience reaction. need 85 - 100 participants minimum for results to mean anything. just like a movie . . . but different . . .

< details >

when/where : monday, april 16 or tuesday, april 17, in Old Main 115.

time : begins at 7:30 p.m. ends 2.5 hours later

what : all you have to do is *watch* (some *writing* involved following the watching part. don't worry, it is *ungraded*)

how : call Jeremy @ 435 - 757 - 3440 (please keep this number a secret) or email gordongj@hass.usu.edu (same goes for the email address)

point. please respond by Sunday, April 15.

INCLUDES:

POP CORN

FREE SEASON PASSES TO PROFESSIONAL THEATRE

BEVERAGES

RATING

R

a fun time for an educational purpose. sorry, that came out wrong. a fun time and the chance to be human experiment samples.

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BY TIM ROBBINS

FREE SCREENING*

WITH A CATCH . . . SEE BELOW

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RATING

R

a fun time for an educational purpose. sorry, that came out wrong. a fun time and the chance to be human experiment samples.

APPENDIX C

Study Demographic Questionnaire and Essay Response Sheet

FIRST: About You: Please take a moment to answer the following questions. All information will be kept confidential and anonymous.

Gender: M F

Religious Affiliation (Please Specify):

Political Affiliation (Please Specify):

Student Status (Please Circle): Senior Junior Sophomore Freshman Graduate Student

Age: 18 – 25 26 – 30 31 – 40 41 or older

SECOND: Embedded: Please discuss your reactions to the DVD version of the play *Embedded*. There are no right or wrong answers and your responses will be kept anonymous. Simply write about how you feel about the play and its themes. Please use the back of sheet and additional paper provided if necessary.

APPENDIX D

Feasibility Essay Response Prompt

Please detail your reactions to *Embedded*. There are no right or wrong answers and your responses will be kept anonymous. Please discuss your reaction openly and fully. Please use the back of sheet and additional paper provided if necessary.

APPENDIX E (CONT.)

Feasibility Questionnaire

4. What are your reactions to depictions of:

The military? Why?

The Media? Why?

Politicians? Why?

Civilians? Why?

Soldiers? Why?

5. What feelings did you experience while watching *Embedded*? Why?

APPENDIX F

Feasibility Demographics Questionnaire

EMBEDDED

BY TIM ROBBINS

QUICK SURVEY



> please take a quick moment to answer the questions below.

< details > information will be kept confidential and anonymous.

Please Circle One or Specify in Space Provided

(except the gender part. not curious about that.)

Gender: M F

Age:

Religious Affiliation: LDS Catholic Lutheran Baptist Unitarian
 Presbyterian Muslim Protestant
 Church of Christ Jehovah Witness
 Agnostic Atheist Other (please specify):

Political Affiliation: Republican Democrat Independent
 Other (please specify):

How often do you attend theatre productions?

Never Sometimes Regularly Frequently

What is your main purpose in attending theatre productions?

Entertainment Social Opportunities (dating, friends, etc.) Required Cultural Knowledge
 Social Awareness Other (please specify):

Thanks. Be assured that your answers are anonymous. Please turn in to research assistants with essay.